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NICK CARTER

A WOMAN OF PLOTS



Nick worked at the railroad wreck with
superhuman courage and endurance.

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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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A Woman of Plots;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S, CLEVEREST COUNTERMOVE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A REAR-END COLLISION.

A crash, a roar, the hissing terror of escaping steam, a thousand indescribable noises; Nick Carter was hurled from his seat in the Pullman as if he were shot out of a gun. For an instant he was stunned, not by any injury he had received, for there was none, but by the suddenness and awfulness of the impact.

But shouts and cries of pain—the innumerable noises that inevitably accompany an accident on a railroad quickly brought him to his senses, and he struggled to his feet only to find that the floor of the car had become an inclined plane upon which it was impossible to stand without retaining hold upon something.

The forward end of the car was pitched downward at an angle of almost forty-five degrees, and the other passengers in the car—Nick recalled the fact that there had been only four besides himself—were shrieking and calling for help from the lower or forward end of the Pullman.

The other passengers were women; he recalled that fact now, and as he looked down the inclined plane toward them he could see that they were huddled to-

gether in a confused heap against the partition which separated the smoking-compartment from the rest of the car.

He had not seen any of their faces; he had entered the car at the last station, bound for New York. It was a sleeper, and it was just after seven o'clock in the evening when the detective boarded the train. He had entered the car at the rear door and had dropped into a seat at that end. Within half an hour thereafter came the collision.

Nick Carter knew from the sounds he heard that the accident was a serious one.

Hoarse shouts, cries of pain, pleadings for assistance sounded from every side outside the car, and there could be no doubt that many persons were injured.

With the accident the lights in the car were extinguished, leaving them in darkness; but through the shattered windows he could see the ugly glare of reflected flames, and he knew that the horror of horrors in a railway accident—fire—menaced the unfortunate passengers.

All this flashed through his mind while he was regaining his feet, and instantly, as soon as he realized the situation and the condition of things, he made his

way as rapidly as possible toward the shrieking women at the forward and lower end of the Pullman.

Fortunately the car had not turned over. It remained upright, and the shattered windows through which the evening air rushed upon them gave promise of comparatively easy exit from the predicament.

The Pullman had barely ceased to vibrate when Nick Carter reached the struggling women at the lower end of it, and there was sufficient light from without to enable him to see dimly the forms of the struggling victims.

He noticed even in that instant that one of them did not struggle; that she remained perfectly still.

He spoke to them peremptorily, almost roughly.

"Stop that yelling if you want me to help you!" he said; and he was rather surprised that they obeyed him instantly, thus assuring him that none of the three who were making the noise had received serious injury.

"Control yourselves, now, and I'll soon have you out of the car," he told them; and then with his foot he completely demolished what remained of the nearest window.

The noise of his efforts brought assistance from the outside, and as he helped one of the women toward the opening, ready arms were extended to receive her.

So, on by one, he passed them outside until only the unconscious woman remained; then he spoke to the men who were helping him.

"Wait," he said. "There is one more woman here. She is unconscious. I don't know whether she is injured or not. I will pass her out to you and then I will follow. There were no other passengers in the car."

It was not light enough for him to see her features distinctly as he raised her in his arms, and yet he received the impression that there was something familiar about her; but he barely gave heed to the thought at the moment. He realized only that she was tall and dark, and young. Then he gave her to the men outside.

An instant later he followed, leaping to the ground none the worse for the accident. He had been traveling "light." He had no baggage save a small grip which contained nothing of value, and he gave no thought to that.

When he alighted upon the ground outside he found that they were on a steep embankment, which gave down to the river from the tracks. Below them, in the river, he could see the locomotive and tender lying on their sides.

Between him and the river were splintered and shattered cars, two of which were burning fiercely; scores of forms were rushing about, rendering what assistance was possible; shouts and shrieks, calls for help, all the din and turmoil of such a frightful accident filled the air. It was a scene indescribable; a scene of horror. Only those who have experienced the like can realize what it must have been.

One hasty glance Nick gave to the four women he had assisted from the car.

The three uninjured ones—unhurt save for a few bruises—were weeping and wringing their hands, bemoaning the loss of their "things," distraited because of the shock and fright from which they were suffering; the fourth was lying on her back on the grass and another woman was bending over her so that still Nick did not see her face.

The men who had assisted them out of the car had gone to render help elsewhere, and only a fifteen-year-old boy remained, evidently in company with the woman who was rendering the unconscious one such timely assistance.

Addressing the boy, he said:

"Do what you can for her, my lad. Is that your mother? Well, thank her for me, and say that I will return as soon as possible."

He darted away then, and for more than an hour worked as only a strong man can work in such a crisis. He did things that were almost superhuman. He was everywhere. By common consent he presently took the direction of affairs, and it was not until the relief-train arrived with doctors and nurses and a corps of skilled workers that he stopped to rest at all.

With the accident itself we have no concern other than has already been described; but with the consequences of that accident, or at least one of them, we have much to do.

It was not until Nick Carter paused to rest after the arrival of the relief-train that he remembered the unconscious woman he had borne from the car; and with the recollection came also the remembrance that there had been something familiar about her; something he had felt he ought to recognize.

The impression came upon him then so forcibly that he set out at once to find her again.

There is a fellow feeling among passengers in the same car which does not extend to others on the same train. Nick felt that in some inexplicable way it was his duty to find that woman again, simply because she had been a passenger on the same car with

him—and perhaps because he had been the only male traveler in the Pullman.

He was grimy with soot and cinders, smoke and dirt. His clothing was torn to tatters. His hat was gone and he looked about as disreputable as a man can; but he gave no thought to these things when he sought the spot where he had left the unconscious woman in the care of the boy and his mother, who had come from one of the other cars, or from somewhere near.

He remembered now that she had worn no hat, and therefore it was likely that she lived somewhere near and had hastened to the scene of the accident with her young son to render what aid she could.

Nick found the spot where he had left them, but it was deserted; there was no one there; and now, intent upon finding the woman he had left unconscious on the hillside, he began passing from group to group, looking for her.

Some of the wrecked cars were still burning, so there was light enough for him to see; but he was in the peculiar situation of searching for a person whom he did not know.

Nick had not seen her features distinctly enough to recall them; but he had an idea that he would know her, nevertheless. He thought he would recognize her by her costume; more than that, he was now firmly impressed by the idea that she was some one he had known in the past.

That was what he was searching for; some one he had known somewhere, for the idea had taken possession of him.

He spent the better part of an hour in passing from group to group, but he saw no one who resembled the woman he sought.

Then he went among the silent ones; those who would never speak again, and lifted the covers from their faces; he did not find her. He heard that many of the injured had been carried to houses near-by, and was hesitating about visiting them, when he felt a tug at his sleeve, and looking down discovered the boy.

"Well, my lad?" he said, in his kindly tone. "You look as though you had been working, too."

"Yes, sir, I have."

"Good! That is a brave lad."

"Your wife, sir, is up at our house, across the track."

"Eh? My wife?" Nick smiled indulgently and was about to disclaim the relationship, when the boy continued:

"Mother told dad and Uncle Ben to carry her there, as soon as the relief-train came, and they weren't needed any more. Then she sent me to find you. But I scarcely knew you, sir. My! but you're a sight."

"I suppose I am," replied Nick, laughing. "But how is the lady?"

The boy seemed not to notice the use of that word, but replied:

"She is unconscious yet, sir. A doctor saw her for a moment and said he didn't think she was severely injured. He said she'd come out of it after a while; and then he hurried away. But mother thinks you ought to know where she is, and that you should go to her. She came to for just a moment after you left us, but all she said was, 'Where is he? Where is he?' Of course, mother knew that she meant you, and mother replied, 'Your husband has gone to help the others.' She seemed to understand, for she smiled, but instantly she became unconscious again. Will you come with me, sir?"

"Yes," said Nick. "Lead the way, my lad." He did not think it necessary just then to enter into explanations with the boy. There would be time for that later on. What he desired most at that moment was an opportunity to wash—and he did feel considerable interest in seeing the woman whom he thought he ought to have recognized.

So he followed the boy up the hill and across the track, thence along a road almost half a mile, where he was taken into a comfortable and commodious farmhouse and ushered into a room where the unconscious woman had been put to bed by the farmer's wife.

Nick stepped up close to the bedside and looked down upon her; and he gave a great start of utter amazement.

He was looking down upon the face of Pauline Hastings.*

CHAPTER II.

NICK IS UP AGAINST IT—HARD.

During several moments Nick Carter remained perfectly motionless, staring down upon the beautiful brunetté features of Pauline Hastings.

He had forgotten her entirely in the stress of other professional cases, but now, as he looked upon her

*Pauline Hastings, charged with two murders, was supposed to be in prison in Texas, awaiting trial. Six months had passed since Nick placed her under arrest, but she had not been brought to trial. For a full history of her career, which is interesting, see the two preceding numbers of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.—EDITOR.

lying there unconscious, recollection returned to him with a rush, and he remembered all that she had done and sought to do in her plans of fancied vengeance against her foster-father, John Y. Ransom, and her foster-sister Irma, both of whom had died from fox-glove poisoning administered by Pauline.

"How has she escaped the consequences of her acts?" he asked himself. "How is it that Pauline Hastings is at liberty? Why is she free and why is she here? She was traveling openly and without disguise; and hence had no apparent fear of arrest? Have the charges against her been dismissed? I understood that an indictment had been found against her—has it been quashed, I wonder? I understand now why in her moment of consciousness she cried out 'Where is he?' She had discovered that I was in the car, although I had not seen her."

He heard a step behind him and turned. The mother of the boy entered the room and stood beside him looking down upon Pauline.

"I am very sorry for you, sir," she said kindly.

"Thank you," replied Nick. He was still thinking about Pauline and gave little heed to what the woman was saying.

"It is strange that she should remain so long a time unconscious."

"Yes; very strange, madam."

"She seems to breathe quite naturally."

"So I thought, madam."

"I have sent for our regular family physician, but he was down at the accident. He will come as soon as he can."

"Thank you."

"I have examined her as thoroughly as I could, sir. Of course, I am not a doctor, but I don't think your wife is injured at all, sir. I think it is only shock and fright. She came to once and asked for you, but lapsed into unconsciousness again the moment she knew you were safe. I am sure, sir, that she is not injured at all, and I can take good care of her; better than you could, I'm sure; and you can do no good here. You look about fagged out, so if you'll take my advice, you'll go to bed after you've had a bath. There is running water and a bathroom on the next floor, and I'm sure you are welcome to all that the house contains. And you needn't worry one mite about her, sir. I'll see to her just as good as a doctor could do it, and I'm positive she isn't hurt at all—not a mite. I'll tell her you're here when she comes around, and that'll pull her out quicker'n anything else could; I know. Now, you come right along with me,

and I'll show you where you can rest when you have had a bath, and I'll call you the minute there is any reason to do so. You're just about dead on your feet. Anybody could see that with half an eye. What might your name be, sir?"

She had seized him by the arm and hustled him out of the room while she was talking; and she rattled on so rapidly in her speech that there was no possibility of interrupting her, even had Nick felt the necessity of doing so.

But a great lassitude had suddenly come upon him.

His labors of the night had been stupendous and continuous. Fatigue—utter and complete exhaustion—had seized him, and he suddenly felt "all in," to use a common expression. The mere mention of a bathtub and a bed brought about a reaction which he did not attempt to combat.

Pauline could wait—everything could wait till he was rested. For once in Nick Carter's life he had gone beyond his powers of endurance, but it had been in the service of others.

The good woman showed him to the room where he was to rest, and pointed out the bathroom.

"There's soap and plenty of towels and everything you need," she said, "and I've laid out one of Henry's pajamas for you, though he don't use 'em much himself. He says it's too much trouble. And I'll take your clothes away if you'll put 'em outside the door, and brush 'em up and mend them the best I can. You jest put 'em there on that chair outside your door and I'll come and get 'em as soon as you're in bed. You ain't told me your name yet."

"My name is Carter, madam; and I'm sure I am very much obliged to you for all your kindness and trouble."

"Now, don't you say another word about that. This world wouldn't be much good if people were all selfish. My name is Miner. My husband is Henry Miner, first selectman of this town. He's a good man, too. Now, you go to bed. I'll lay out one of Henry's clean shirts for you to put on in the morning. You're about the same size. And you needn't worry one mite about your wife, for I'll take care of her;" and she whisked away, calling back over her shoulder as she went: "Don't forget to leave your clothes outside the door."

Nick Carter never remembered very clearly just how he got that bath and finally disposed of himself in the soft bed. He was too tired. He did remember that nothing ever felt quite so good as that bed did

when at last he got into it—not forgetting to put his clothes outside the door.

Utter fatigue. Have you ever experienced it? Words have no power to describe the condition. It is beyond description.

Dreamless slumber! The heaven of it!

But Nick Carter had done the work of half a dozen ordinary men during that awful hour and a half that succeeded the accident.

He had been everywhere, lifting, pulling, hauling, directing, exerting all his great strength to aid those who were imprisoned inside the burning cars.

Now he rested.

When he awoke it was yet very early in the morning; he could tell that by the general appearance of things, although the sun had risen and was shining aslant into the room.

Leaping from the bed he went again to the bathroom, where he had taken the precaution to refill the tub after bathing, and now he took the cold plunge, and by the time he returned to his room he felt as fit as ever he had, for Nick's muscles were always in such perfect trim that he could do no more than tire them; he could never strain them.

On reentering his room he discovered his clothes on the chair outside the door; they had been thoroughly cleaned and neatly mended so that by the time he was dressed—with Henry's clean shirt and collar—he felt that he presented quite a respectable appearance, notwithstanding his disreputable condition when he entered the house.

Being fully dressed, he descended the stairs determined to walk down to the scene of the wreck and return in time for breakfast.

As he passed through the lower hall, however, his way took him past the door of the room where he had seen Pauline Hastings.

It was partly ajar, and he paused for an instant to peer inside the room, never doubting that Mrs. Miner was there on watch, as she had said she would be.

There was no one there, however, save Pauline herself, and she appeared to be lying in exactly the same position and condition she had occupied when he last saw her.

Believing her to be still unconscious, wondering that she had been left alone, startled by the sudden thought that possibly she had died during the night while he had been sleeping, he stepped inside the room and approached the bedside on tiptoe.

Pauline was breathing regularly and easily—as

she had been doing at the time he left her; but she looked rather pale, he thought, and he bent nearer to her to discover if she was still in that strange unconscious state.

One of her hands rested upon the counterpane of the bed, and he touched it with his own—and then he started back quickly, for the slender fingers grasped his own and held them. At the same instant Pauline opened her big black eyes and she smiled mockingly upon him from the pillow.

Save for the tightening of her fingers upon his own and the opening of her eyes, she did not move.

For just a moment Nick was rather nonplused; then he sought to release his hand, but only to find that she clung to it the more tightly, and was determined not to loosen her hold.

It was a tableau not at all in accordance with his tastes; the situation was not to his liking—and he was still in some doubt as to Pauline's condition; it might be that she would lapse again into unconsciousness if he did not conduct himself with extreme care.

"You are better this morning, Pauline?" he remarked, rather inanely.

"Yes," she replied, in a half-whisper; "much better."

"I will call Mrs. Miner," he said, trying again to release his hand from her grasp; but she clung to it tenaciously, and replied:

"No. Wait. I wish to talk with you."

"But this is hardly a proper time and place for us to hold a conversation," he insisted.

"Nonsense. Why not?"

"Well——"

"Haven't you a perfect right to be here? Are you not my husband?" she asked, with perfect demureness, but with another of her mocking smiles.

He jerked his hand away from her and stood up—right; then he turned about and would have left the room had not her next words arrested him.

"Wait, Nick!" she said, rather sharply, using his given name with all the ease of one who might have been long accustomed to it. "We are known as husband and wife in this house. It is your fault, not mine. It seems that you claimed me—or, if you did not do that, you permitted these good people to assume that we are so related. I had no idea when I started for New York to see you that you would so honor me. Mrs. Miner told me that you were terribly anxious about your dear wife, and she called me Mrs. Carter over and over again. I did not deny the soft im-

peachment; you may be sure. It is all your doing; not mine—and you had better stay and talk to me.”

“I was too tired—too greatly exhausted to realize what was said to me last night,” he replied to her.

“I haven’t a doubt of it, Nick; not one. But the indictment stands, doesn’t it?”

“Speaking of indictments, Pauline, what about yours?” Nick asked quickly. He did not enjoy the other subject and was glad to get away from it.

“Draw up a chair and sit here by my bedside and I will tell you about it,” she replied, with another of her mocking smiles. “You can’t expect me to talk with you when you are almost out of the room, and seem to be frightened lest some one will appear and find you here. You are such a brave man that I should think you could face a situation like this one.”

For just an instant he hesitated; then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he pulled a chair to the middle of the room, midway between the bedside and the open door, and dropped upon it.

“Well,” he said, “what became of the indictment against you? That is what I chiefly desire to know just now.”

“It was quashed.”

“Quashed? By whom?”

“By the prosecuting attorney himself. He told the Court that he was satisfied a great injustice had been done; that he was convinced of my entire innocence; and he used a lot of legal terms that I know nothing about. But the upshot of it is that I am just as free as I ever was, and so I started north at once to find——”

She paused abruptly, and another of her mocking smiles gleamed in her eyes; then she said to some person who had suddenly appeared behind Nick Carter:

“Good morning, Mrs. Miner. My husband is here first, you see.”

CHAPTER III.

NICK CARTER FINDS A RIDDLE.

The detective started to his feet determined to end the farce at once, but before he could utter a word Mrs. Miner had begun to talk, and then there was no hope for him. He realized it with an inward groan, and he thought: “I’ll await a better opportunity.”

“Land sakes!” she exclaimed. “Who’d ‘a’-thought you’d be out uh bed this early, Mr. Carter! And you

that tired you looked almost dead. Indeed, you did. But there’s no tellin’ what a person can stand until a test comes like that one of last night. Did you find your clothes? I see you did, ‘cause you’ve got ‘em on. I done the best I could with ‘em, though I guess you’ll have to have a new suit right off. And your poor wife! She had her eyes open when I got back after taking you to your room and showin’ you where the bathroom was. I was for callin’ you down at once to see her—I thought mebby you’d sleep better if you knew she was all right; but the poor dear wouldn’t hear of it. Then I told her that I had to mend your clothes for you, ‘cause they wasn’t fit to be seen in the way they was, and she made me say that I’d come back here and set with her while I was doin’ it. She was terrible scairt at first, fearin’ that you was hurt or somethin’, but I says to her, ‘Land sakes, there ain’t nothin’ the matter with him ‘cept that he’s tired most to death and he’s got a few scratches on his hands that’ll most likely wash off in the morning.’ I fixed her some bröth, and she drank a cup of milk, and it turned out jest as I said it would—there ain’t nothin’ the matter with her at all. The doctor didn’t come, so it’s lucky there ain’t. While I was mendin’ your clothes, we set here and talked just like old friends. You’re a lucky man to have a wife like that, Mr. Carter; and I guess she’s a lucky woman, too. But jest see what time it’s gettin’ to be, and breakfast ain’t started yet. Now, you two go right ahead with your billin’ and cooin’ while I get breakfast. I’ll call you when it’s ready; but you mustn’t let your wife get up; not on any account. It won’t be any trouble at all to bring her breakfast in to her.”

Mrs. Miner was out of the door and gone before she had ceased speaking, and the last words she uttered came from the hallway and were followed by the banging of a distant door as she passed into another room.

Pauline burst into immoderate laughter, although it was tuned to a very low key, so that it might not be heard beyond that room.

Nick was inclined to be angry, but his sense of the ludicrous side of the situation was keenly alive, and he grinned in spite of himself.

“That’s right,” said Pauline, perceiving his expression. “Take it as it comes, Nick. Make the best of it. I call it an extremely interesting situation.”

“You seem to have done your utmost to foster it,” he replied, with some annoyance.

“Well—why shouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know why you should have done so.”

"You will know before you are very many hours older."

"Oh; will I?"

"And, besides, it is your own doing. Imagine my astonishment when I recovered consciousness to discover that I was already accepted here as your wife, and that you had acquiesced in the statement. Of course, I fostered it; why shouldn't I?"

"Why should you?"

He left his chair, which he had resumed, and started for the door without waiting for a reply to his question; but Pauline called sharply to him:

"Where are you going?"

"I am going to set things straight. I am going to explain things to Mrs. Miner."

"Don't be silly. Do you want to outrage every sense of decency that good Mrs. Miner has got? What do you suppose she will think of me, after what I have said to her and what *you* have said as well, if you go to her now and tell her that I am *not* your wife? I don't think you can quite do that, Nick; not now, after all that has passed. If you will stop a moment and think you will see that you can't. Besides, we will be gone from here in a few hours. Let things stand as they are. Sit down and talk to me."

"No; I am going out to get some fresh air."

He passed resolutely from the room without another word; although Pauline called after him to return soon, and he walked with rapid steps toward the scene of the accident, vaguely troubled by the circumstances by which he was so suddenly surrounded.

He recalled now the conversation with Mrs. Miner, and with her son, after the accident.

Nick had been too tired then to give much heed to what was said. If he had thought about it at all it was to the effect that everything could easily be corrected in the morning—but now that the morning had come, things could not be easily corrected.

He realized that all too plainly.

In appearing to acquiesce, as he had done, in the supposition that he was the husband, he had given Pauline an opportunity which she had not hesitated to use.

But why had she cared to make use of it? What was her object? In what manner did she expect to be benefited by the present situation?

She had always been a plotter and a planner. Was she doing this only to annoy him? or was there a deeper and a stronger motive behind it all?

Impossible, Nick thought. No motive of any im-

portance could have sprung up so suddenly from nothing at all.

Still, as he walked on toward the scene of last night's accident, he was vaguely uneasy, for he had had experience enough with Pauline Hastings to know something of her resourcefulness when there was plotting to be done. And he knew she hated him—hated him with a hatred so intense as to be almost deadly of itself.

It was a new experience for Nick Carter to be trapped so; to have walked into it, as it were, with his eyes open.

But *was* there a trap? Was not the whole thing merely the outcome of an incident that would be forgotten almost as soon as it happened?

He knew Pauline—or thought he knew her.

As the adopted daughter of John Y. Ransom of Texas she had been reared in luxury with her supposed sister Irma. Then had followed the interferences of a certain Basil King, now a "lifer" convict in a prison in Texas; then came the mysterious death of John Y., supposed to have resulted from apoplexy; then the marriage of Irma to James Congdon, of Kansas City, and her subsequent death on board an ocean liner as it was leaving the port of New York—a death that was exactly similar in every respect to that of her father; then the pursuit and arrest of King and Pauline, down at the Rio Grande, and Pauline's confession to Nick that she alone was responsible for the two fatalities—that she had administered fox-glove to her victims; and fox-glove is digitalis in its crude or vegetable state. And now—this.

Pauline was not less beautiful and attractive than she had always been, and she was superlative in both respects.

She had the big, smouldering, expressive black eyes of her Mexican mother and all the grace and litheness of her border-outlaw father, Henry Hastings; and added to these she possessed the advantages of a superior education, an indomitable will, a nature that was absolutely fearless.

She believed that John Y. Ransom had killed her father, therefore she had taken vengeance upon him. She had hated Irma because Irma had chosen to ignore her, and therefore she had taken vengeance upon her; now there was no reason to doubt that she hated Nick Carter just as cordially because he had twice arrested her and thrice foiled her plots and plans, and that she was already making use of her freedom to work

out some other scheme of vengeance against the detective.

But why this attitude that she had so suddenly assumed, if such was her purpose?

Was the mistake of good Mrs. Miner and her son in supposing them to be husband and wife somehow working in with her plans?

It would seem so; it would seem so, indeed, she had taken to it so readily and with such evident relish.

It was apparent to Nick that Pauline had seen him enter the Pullman car at the station where he had boarded the train, and was therefore aware of his presence near her at the time of the accident. Her exclamation, "Where is he?" proved that.

Nick knew now that that was the reason why he had not seen her face before the accident happened. She had kept it resolutely averted; or had covered it when there was a chance that he might see and recognize her.

Then he gave a violent start. Another idea had occurred to him.

Had Pauline been shamming all the time when she was supposed to be unconscious?

Had she purposely brought about the situation which was now so anomalous?

Had she only feigned unconsciousness at the time he lifted her from the wrecked car and passed her through the window to the men waiting outside? Had she still feigned unconsciousness when good Mrs. Miner was bending over her. Had she kept up the play while she was carried to the house, and afterward until Nick Carter, utterly exhausted, had been prevailed upon to retire in the same house with her?

Truly, Pauline was a woman of plots; a woman to be feared and therefore to be watched.

And she worked with a woman's weapons.

Subtlety was her forte and she was a thorough mistress of it.

She was marvelously and wonderfully attractive, too. There was a fascination about her which even Nick Carter, knowing her as well as he did, could not deny.

"What a woman!" he murmured, under his breath. "If only her energies had been rightly directed, if only her initiatives were straight and true, there is nothing that could have resisted her. As it is, there is very little of evil that she cannot accomplish if she makes the effort."

It was quite plain to the detective why the prosecuting attorney of that county in Texas had quashed the indictment against her; the man had fallen under

the spell of her marvelous personality. She had made him believe absolutely in her innocence.

And after all, why not?

There had been no confession from her save that one made to Nick Carter on the Mexican bank of the Rio Grande; nobody but the detective had heard it. Her word was as good as his in the eyes of the law—much better than his, doubtless, in the estimation of that attorney who had fallen under the spell of her witchery.

"But there is another man whom she hates as cordially as she does me," the detective mused on. "Irma's husband, James Congdon, should be one of her prospective victims, if she has really started out on a career of vengeance. She would not spare him. Indeed, it seems to me as if he would be the very first of her victims—if she is seeking victims. It seems absurd to think upon, and yet—I know Pauline. The vendetta of the Corsican is not more deadly than her hatred."

He came then to the scene of the accident where many men were still at work, and he strolled over toward the place where a man was standing guard over valuables that had been collected from among the wreckage. He thought that possibly his small grip might be there.

It was. He presently found it and claimed it, having given his name and proved its contents. But as he was turning away the guard called to him:

"Wait a moment, sir. Here is another small bag with Mrs. Carter's name upon the tag. Here it is;" and he passed it to Nick and turned away to attend to others who had come up; and Nick accepted the bag and turned away with it in his grasp, reading from the tag as he did so the legend:

"Mrs. Nicholas Carter, New York City."

CHAPTER IV.

PAULINE'S REMARKABLE PLOT.

That the bag belonged to Pauline there could be no doubt; Nick realized that at once, and therefore the moment he was away from the scene of the wreck he felt no hesitation in opening it and examining its contents.

There was nothing there, however, to interest him. The bag contained only such articles of necessary toilet which a woman always wishes to have ready at hand. Then he turned his attention to the tag itself.

After a moment of close inspection, he smiled grimly, and he said aloud, since there was no one near to hear him:

"Talk about coolness and resourcefulness in an emergency! Pauline beats anybody, man or woman, that I ever knew."

His reason for this exclamation was apparent. The card was a written one, and it was not plainly written; neither did the card fit the tag as it would have done had it been carefully prepared by one so deliberate as Pauline.

In fact, as Nick examined it he came to the conclusion that *Pauline had prepared it after* he entered the Pullman car.

The discovery—or the thing which Nick believed he had discovered, at least made one part of the affair plain: It told why Mrs. Miner and her son had been led into the belief that he was Pauline's husband. She had herself said or done something to give the impression, during the moment of supposed return to consciousness, when the woman was bending over her and when Nick had gone to render aid to others.

The detective pondered a moment. Then he tore the card into bits and threw it aside, after which he returned leisurely to the place where he had obtained it, and, watching for an opportunity, quietly returned it to the heap of unclaimed articles.

The guard did not see him do this; nobody saw it, and he turned away a second time and now returned at once to the farmer's house, feeling somewhat guilty for being late to the bounteous breakfast that he knew would have been prepared.

Mrs. Miner came to the door to meet him.

"Come right in, Mr. Carter," she said. "We have been waiting for you, but we haven't been waiting long, so you needn't worry. And what do you suppose? That wife of yours has disobeyed me. She got up and dressed after you went out and——"

She pushed open the dining-room door at that instant, and Pauline, who had been standing near one of the windows talking with a man who was evidently the farmer, turned quickly, and, with a glad cry, rushed forward and threw her arms around Nick's neck, kissing him twice before he, in his astonishment, could prevent the act.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come, Nick!" she exclaimed, as he thrust her away from him, none too gently, either; and she added: "Don't be cross. Aren't you glad I'm better? You don't act as if you were."

"This business has gone far enough, Pauline," he

said to her, in an undertone, so that the others could not hear. "If you make any more breaks like that one——"

"Mr. Carter, this is my husband," said Mrs. Miner, breaking in upon them. "Set right down and eat a hearty breakfast;" and she kept up an incessant chatter, which need not be repeated here, but which effectually prohibited every one else from saying a word.

She went over, in detail, everything connected with the accident and the wreck; she told how a claim-agent had already been there, while Nick was absent, and had talked with Pauline, who had assured him that no claim would be made against the company if only her trunks were found and forwarded; how Pauline had gone so far as to sign a release for the agent, on condition that he would find the baggage and forward it, and how she had given the man her check so he could identify them.

To all of which Nick paid very little attention, being occupied by the same line of thought that had troubled him while he was on his way to the scene of the wreck; but he did hear it all, vaguely, and afterward he had good cause to remember it.

When breakfast was nearly finished Pauline raised her eyes to Nick and, in her softest tones, said:

"Don't you think, dear, that we should be going now, as soon as possible? Mr. Miner says that an express-train passes through here at ten o'clock, and the claim-agent told me that he would telegraph to have it stop long enough to take us aboard."

What could Nick Carter say to that? Nothing. Either he must blurt out the whole thing and wantonly hurt the feelings of the good people who had cared for them so tenderly, or he must remain silent.

He chose the latter course, because there seemed at the moment to be no other way possible.

And all the time Mrs. Miner kept up an incessant chatter, which precluded the possibility of an explanation, even had Nick sought to make one.

He felt that he was getting deeper and deeper into the mesh, but also that there was no immediate method of avoiding it.

Disturbed by the situation more than he realized, he kept aloof from the others during the time that intervened until they were to go to the train, and was still more disturbed when the good farmer and his wife absolutely refused to receive any recompense for what they had done.

He saw, however, that they would be deeply offended if he continued to insist, and so he gave it up, ac-

cepting that situation as he had been compelled to accept the others.

Then they went to the track to await the arrival of the train.

Nick wondered if Pauline would make any effort to find her small black bag, but she did not, although she saw that Nick had recovered his.

Presently he said to her (both the Miners, or, rather, all three of them, had accompanied them to the train and were closely at hand):

"Didn't you have a bag, Pauline?"

"Yes; but it's of no consequence. There wasn't the least thing of value in it, Nick. I would much rather lose it than to search through that horrid heap of stuff and have to identify it. Let it go."

Nick wondered why, but he said nothing. He was to discover why later on.

Then the train came and they parted from the good friends who had taken such excellent care of them. The claim-agent had been true to his word, and the express-train stopped to take them aboard—and presently they were speeding onward toward the city of New York, where they were due to arrive early that same evening.

Seated in the Pullman the detective turned to his companion and said sternly:

"Now, Pauline, I've got something to say to you! I want you to listen to it to the end, and when I have finished I shall go into the smoking-compartment. While I am there, you can think over what I shall say, and I hope that by the time we meet again to-day, you will have adopted a different course from the one you are following now."

"Well, what is it?" she smiled back at him.

"This: There must be no more of this folly about our supposed relation to each other. I won't have it so."

She only smiled; she did not reply, and he went on:

"I don't know whether you have told me the truth or not about that indictment business in Texas, but I propose to find out about it by telegraph as soon as we arrive in New York. If you have deceived me about it, you had better make yourself scarce with as little delay as possible, for in that case I shall arrest you with as little compunction as I would show to any other criminal. I don't know what your game is, nor why you undertook it as you did; but whatever it is, it won't work with me."

Again that puzzling smile of hers; as he was leaving her, she said:

"Will you be long gone, Nick?"

"Until we arrive in New York. Yes."

"And do you mean to let me starve all day, just because of the little joke I have chosen to play upon you?"

"There is a dining-car attached to the train."

"But I have no money; not a cent. I lost my purse somehow, during the wreck."

For reply Nick produced a roll of bills from one of his pockets, and, peeling off a yellow-back twenty, gave it to her—and he did not notice that the Pullman conductor and the porter were both quite near to him when he did so.

"That will see you through, till you can get more," he said. "I don't know why I give it to you, but——"

"You do it because you are always so good to me," she replied distinctly; so distinctly that the conductor and the porter could both hear what she said.

But Nick turned away without another word and went at once to the smoking-compartment, where he lighted a cigar and buried himself in a paper that he found on the seat.

And he naturally did not notice that the moment he left Pauline she engaged the Pullman conductor in conversation—a conversation which lasted some time and which ended by his giving her his card, and by her giving him one after she had written an address upon it.

It will be interesting for us to know now just what the character of that conversation was, as it all came out later.

"Conductor," she said, "I find that I lost my purse somewhere in the wreckage. I wonder if you would be good enough to take a description of it for me and report it when you return?"

"Certainly, madam. With pleasure," he replied.

"There was some money in it; also some cards, bearing my name—Mrs. Nicholas Carter;" and here she described other imaginary things which the purse, at that moment concealed in her bosom, was supposed to contain. "The money you may devote to charity, or to any cause you choose, but I would like to have the purse if I can recover it. Now, will you give me your name and address?"

He did so, of course; and that was all she wanted—just his name and address, for she knew that he had seen Nick give her the twenty-dollar bill.

When the conductor had gone on through the car, she rang for the porter, and to him she said:

"Porter, what time do they serve dinner on this train?"

"From noon till half-past two, madam," was the reply.

"I wish you would reserve a table for Mr. Carter and myself, for one o'clock." She gave him a substantial tip. "What is your name and where do you live?"

He told her, and she wrote it down carefully. Then she handed him an engraved card on which she wrote an address, telling him also about the supposed loss of her purse.

But the card she gave to him was the point. It was precisely like the one she had given to the conductor. It was beautifully engraved and it bore the inscription:

MRS. NICHOLAS CARTER.

Underneath that she had written in each case the address of Nick Carter's home in New York.

Somewhat later, when the train-conductor was passing through, she stopped him and engaged him in the same sort of conversation, with the result that she also obtained his name and address, and he departed with another of the "Mrs. Nicholas Carter" cards and the written address beneath the name.

Truly, had Nick watched these happenings he would have realized that there was a much deeper and better-laid plot than he had imagined hitherto.

Pauline had started on her scheme of vengeance against the detective, but only after very carefully matured plans, which the accident and the wreck had materially assisted and hastened.

Pauline was exultant.

CHAPTER V.

A WOMAN OF MANY WILES.

At one o'clock the porter announced to Pauline that the dinner she had ordered was in readiness. He was all bows and smiles, for he had received a handsome tip already, and he believed there was another in sight.

"You will find Mr. Carter in the smoking-compartment," she told him. "Please ask him to come to me for a moment. You need say nothing about the dinner. I'll do that. He is not well since the accident, and may possibly not wish to eat."

Now, that was precisely what Nick did wish to do at that very moment. He had not eaten very much of the bounteous breakfast that morning, and the day had brought a sharp appetite; but he had hesitated about going to the dining-car. He did not want to

dine with Pauline; and he felt that it would be an ungenerous act for him to go there without her.

Then the porter appeared.

"Mr. Carter?" he inquired respectfully.

"Yes."

"Madam would be glad if you would go to her for a moment, sir," the porter announced, and withdrew.

For an instant Nick hesitated; then, with a characteristic shrug, he rose and went through the car to Pauline.

"Well?" he inquired, standing in the aisle beside her.

"Won't you sit down a moment?" she asked, in her pleasantest tones.

The detective seated himself facing her.

"I have taken the liberty of ordering dinner for two," she said placidly. "I ordered it for one o'clock. It is now one, and the dinner has been announced. Won't you go into the dining-car with me? It would look rather strange if we were to go separately."

Nick did not reply, and she continued:

"You know we are marked people aboard this car. We are known to have been in the wreck, and therefore people are interested in us. There surely can be no harm in our dining together, and the comments, if we do *not*, would be unpleasant—at least to me."

"Come, then," he replied, and turned away. She rose with an exultant smile on her face and followed him.

For a time they ate in silence; that is, with only an occasional remark from Pauline, to which Nick invariably replied in monosyllables.

"You are not good company to-day," she said to him, at last.

"I am not seeking to make myself agreeable," he replied.

"Do you still feel resentful about that little joke of mine? It was great fun."

"Oh, never mind that. You carried it rather too far; but it is past now."

"Well, then, why not be agreeable, since we happen to be traveling companions?"

"You should know the answer to that question as well as I, Pauline."

"Bah! Do you still believe that I am guilty of what you once charged me?"

"I have your own words to convince me."

"My own words! Uttered when I was only half-conscious! Uttered when I was half-drowned and wholly frightened. They meant nothing. I had no

more to do with the deaths of John Y. and Irma than you had, Nick Carter."

"I wish I could believe you, Pauline; but I cannot."

"I repeat, I had absolutely nothing to do with the death of either of them. They died as the doctors said they did, of apoplexy. John Y. had taken digitalis all his life for a weakness of the heart. Irma had the same difficulty, and he induced her to take the same remedy. You know as well as I know that digitalis is a cumulative poison. A person may take the same does for months, and then will come a day when one more dose of exactly the same quantity will kill. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that is how each of them met death. I had no hand in it."

"I wish I could believe you, Pauline—but I cannot."

"Why?"

"You hated them both. I know your vengeful nature. I know that at this moment you hate me so cordially that if a look of your eyes could kill, you would not hesitate to make use of the necessary expression."

Pauline burst into hearty laughter so that others in the car glanced toward her and smiled in sympathy. Nick smiled, too, perceiving that others were noticing them.

"How melodramatic you are, Nick," she said, in an undertone. "Really, I begin to believe that you are not the great detective you are reputed to be, after all, but are only a man."

He did not reply.

"Won't you smile for the lady?" she asked demurely; so demurely that Nick smiled in spite of himself. "There, that is better. How is your dinner? Do you like what I ordered?"

"Yes. I was very hungry," he admitted.

"And you were nevertheless determined to go without your dinner rather than ask me to dine with you! It is fortunate for both of us that I forestalled you, for I was also very hungry."

"What is the game you are playing, Pauline?" he asked her abruptly. "There is a game; of that I am convinced. What is it?"

She looked the detective squarely in the eyes and replied with slow deliberation:

"Nick, I took this trip to New York because I was determined to convince you that I am not guilty of the crimes with which you have charged me. That is the game—if you choose to call it a game."

"But why, then, this Mrs. Carter business?"

Again her laughter, although low-keyed, reached every ear in the car.

"It was too good an opportunity to lose, Nicholas," she said, lowering her voice. "You believe that I love vengeance, but I love a joke better. Then I saw that it annoyed you—that it teased you. I love to tease people."

"Don't you think you have carried it quite far enough?"

"Perhaps."

"Weren't you feigning unconsciousness——"

"The ideal. Why should I do that? Listen, Nick. I saw you when you got aboard the train, and, although I was greatly surprised, I determined to make the most of it. I was on the very point of going back through the car to speak to you when the accident occurred."

"And, in the meantime," said Nick coldly, "you had prepared a written card with my name upon it which you slipped into the tag of your satchel."

She looked at him for a moment in silence, through narrowed lids; then she said:

"So; you found my bag, did you?"

"Yes."

"Why did you not return it to me?"

"Because of the name in the leather tag. I knew no such person."

"You looked inside the bag?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"There was, as you have said, nothing there of value. I preferred to leave it for you to claim."

"But you destroyed the card?"

"Certainly."

Again she laughed, in a very low tone, and somehow it was not a pleasant laugh to hear.

"I had just written that card and inserted it in the tag when the crash came," she said pleasantly. "You will think that I had a definite reason for doing so; possibly I had; possibly, also, it was an act of impulse. You may take it either way you choose."

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"How long do you propose to keep this thing going?" he asked.

"Oh!"—she laughed directly at him—"until I have made you thoroughly angry, I suppose. It isn't pleasant to be claimed for a husband by the woman you have twice charged with being a murderess, is it? I have pitted my wits against yours, Nick, and mine are the more subtle, believe me. You are a great detective—there is none greater; but you haven't a woman's

character of mind. You don't half-know me yet, Nicholas."

"I am beginning to think that is true."

"You will be more firmly convinced of it before long."

"Pauline, that is the second time to-day that you have uttered a veiled threat."

"Is it? I was not aware that I had threatened you at all."

"I am quite willing to keep up this outward semblance of companionship until we arrive in New York, if you desire it, but the moment I have put you in a carriage——"

"A taxicab, if you please. I have heard about them."

"Very well, a taxicab. The moment I have put you into one of them on the New York side of the river, all idea of companionship between us must end."

"Yes."

"You say you have come to New York to convince me of your innocence; I tell you that you cannot convince me, because I have too keen a recollection of your own confession to me. If the Texan authorities chose to quash the indictment against you, that is their lookout. My own personal indictment against you stands—and will continue to stand. I hope I have made you understand that there can be no further intercourse between us."

"You have certainly said it plainly enough."

"Very well, then. Let us return to our car."

"Wait a moment. Are you so ungenerous as to refuse to be convinced? That doesn't sound like Nick Carter."

"Let it sound as it will. Six months ago I would have been glad to give you every opportunity to convince me that I had erred; but after that scene on the Rio Grande, after your scheming to liberate Basil King from prison, after you escaped with him and attempted to get to Mexico, after the chase and capture and your confession to me, there is nothing left that you can say or do which will change my opinion on the subject. You are a free woman now. The law has set you free—if you have told me the truth, and I do not doubt that."

"Thank you for that much."

"Why don't you return to Texas where you have money and property?"

"Because my place is in New York."

"Your place?"

"Yes. You will understand soon enough."

Again the veiled threat. Nick recognized it, but he made no remark upon it.

"Your place is in New York?" he repeated. "I do not understand that expression."

"As I said a moment ago, you will understand it soon enough. My place is in New York. My husband lives there. You did not know I had been married? How strange! I thought you knew everything. You have that reputation."

"Married?" said Nick. "Then your name is no longer Hastings."

"No; certainly not—since I am married."

"What is your married name? Is it King?"

"King?" she laughed. "Basil King is my half-uncle, as you know."

"What is your married name, Pauline?"

"Don't you wish you knew?"

"Yes; otherwise I would not have asked."

She leaned forward across the table toward him and replied:

"Then I will tell you. My married name is—Carter!" And she burst into another peal of laughter as she left the table.

Nick Carter frowned, and followed her from the car.

CHAPTER VI.

MEETING CUNNING WITH CUNNING.

"You are still intent upon your joke," he said to her, when they had returned to their own car.

"Yes; it is too good a one to abandon readily," she replied, smiling at him.

He left her without more words and returned to the smoking-compartment, which he did not leave again until the train was running in at the station. Then he went to her and announced:

"I will keep my word good. I will put you in a taxicab on the other side of the river."

"Thank you," she replied; but said nothing more.

They crossed the river in silence, and there was not another word exchanged between them until Nick had called the taxi and was assisting her to enter it.

"To what hotel shall I direct the man?" he asked her then.

"Won't you ride up-town with me, Nick?" she replied.

"No."

"Please."

"No; thank you."

"Tell the man, then, to go to the Holland."

Nick closed the door, gave the proper direction, and walked away through the gathering gloom.

He was more disturbed by this encounter and its consequences than he admitted even to himself. There was upon him a vague impression that he had not seen and heard the last of Pauline Hastings and her "joke."

Indeed, he would have been still more thoroughly convinced of that fact could he have seen that the taxicab had not gone half a mile toward its destination when Pauline stopped it, and gave a different direction to the driver; but, inasmuch as the second address was not far removed from the first one he had received, he went on by the same route he had previously taken.

And all the while Pauline was smiling, evidently well pleased by the turn that her affairs had taken.

Nick Carter walked.

He wanted to walk after the long confinement of the car.

The evening was a pleasant one, and, when he arrived at Broadway, instead of taking a car there, as he had intended to do, he continued to walk onward, turning northward toward his home.

This having a wife foisted upon him was an entirely new experience to the detective. It was extremely disagreeable, even as a joke, for Pauline was not the sort of woman with whom he cared to joke.

As he walked onward he reviewed the circumstances of their meeting, and all that had resulted from it.

The collision—the crash—the confusion that followed—the four women in the car—the one who was unconscious or appeared to be so and, whom he thought he vaguely recognized—his assisting her from the car—his promise to return later—his work with the rescuers—his search for the unknown woman—the arrival of the boy who had referred to the unknown as his wife and how he had let the reference pass—the scene at the house when Pauline was still supposedly unconscious—his own utter exhaustion, and, therefore, his indifference to everything that Mrs. Miner said—his apparent acceptance of the situation, thinking that all would be easily explained in the morning—the scene in Pauline's sleeping-room and the entrance there of Mrs. Miner—the scene in the breakfast-room when Pauline kissed him before he was able to prevent it—Pauline's interview with the claim-agent—he did not know what that was—and the subsequent stopping of the express-train to take up "Mr. and Mrs. Carter." (That had escaped him till now)—the passing of the money to Pauline aboard the train, in the presence of others—the dinner order and their dining tête-à-tête.

He thought out all these things consecutively, and with some vague uneasiness—and then he stopped still in the middle of the sidewalk. Stopped so suddenly that a person who was walking rapidly behind him collided with him just as those two trains had collided on the railroad. A rear-end collision.

Nick turned quickly and found himself face to face with the conductor of the train that had brought them to New York.

The recognition was instant and mutual.

"Hello, Mr. Carter!" exclaimed the conductor. "You see I know your name. Your wife wished me to try to find her purse for her and gave me her card. I'll find it if I can. Sorry I ran into you. Good night, sir. I'm in a awful hurry."

He rushed onward, leaving Nick still standing where he had stopped.

But it was that very thought now voiced and clinched by the train-conductor that had brought the detective to that sudden halt.

He had suddenly seen through all Pauline's schemes; at least, he believed he had done so.

This, then, was to be her scheme of vengeance against him!

This was what she had come to New York to do—to claim Nick Carter as her husband; and he, by the very accident of meeting her on the train, and by reason of the wreck that followed so closely after it, had helped her along in her plot so amazingly.

For a moment he was utterly appalled by the idea. Then he laughed; laughed aloud and continued on his way up-town.

He saw through the whole scheme now—that scheme of Pauline's which he had so materially aided toward fulfillment.

And he knew Pauline!

He knew that she would not undertake such a thing unless she was previously armed at every point.

He knew that she would not have dared to undertake it unless she was previously prepared to meet and counteract every obstacle that was put in her way.

Again he paused to consider.

"She will have everything in perfect order," he mused to himself. "She will have a marriage-certificate, forged to be sure, but a certificate nevertheless. She will have some registry of a church somewhere, properly filled out. She will have witnesses, false witnesses, certainly, but people who are ready to swear that they were present. She will have found somewhere an unscrupulous minister who for a consideration will be willing to swear to anything. She will have

everything cut and dried so that there will be no denying her, unless——"

He did not complete the sentence even in his thoughts; he was not quite ready to do that yet.

"She will change that direction to her driver, and will go directly to my house, if I am right in this," he thought on, presently, but continuing to walk, although slowly. "And Chick and Patsy are both away from home. Joseph is there, but he will not know what to do. Mrs. Peters is there, and she will not know what to do; and—Pauline is there by this time!

"By Jove! but she is a wonderful woman when all is said!" he exclaimed presently, not without genuine admiration for Pauline's ability and courage in his voice. "And what a scheme of vengeance! *What* a scheme of vengeance! To come here to New York and claim me as her husband! To assert and be prepared to prove that we were married in Texas when I was down there arresting her for murder. Why, the thing is amazing in its originality and daring!

"How am I to meet it? That is the question. How am I to meet it?

"If I return to the house now, and attempt to face her down, she will only laugh at me! I can put her out of the house, to be sure, but that is precisely what she wants me to do—in order that to-morrow morning *she could begin a suit for separation.*

"Oh, it is all very plain to me now; only too plain.

"Pauline, you are a wonder! an amazing wonder!

"But I must meet fire with fire; craft with craft; cunning with cunning, if I would save myself a whole lot of scandal, and the sort of notoriety that I most despise.

"If I return to my home I will find her there just as sure as shooting. If I put her out of the house, she will begin suit against me in the morning, and I may be sure that she is prepared to establish it.

"On the other hand, if I should permit her to remain one night in my house, *knowing* her to be there—if I should give my consent to her remaining one hour there, she would have me under the common law where I couldn't escape."

He stopped again and laughed, but it was at his own predicament and not because of anything particularly humorous that he had thought of.

He had arrived at Fourteenth Street by now, and he crossed the square to the Clarendon Hotel where he entered a telephone-booth, giving his own number for the call. Presently, when he heard the receiver lifted from the hook at the other end, he spoke quickly, and continued to talk rapidly so that the person at the

other end of the wire had no opportunity to say as much as "hello"!

"Don't say a word, Joseph; not a single word if that is you at the phone. Just whistle Chick's signal for me if it is you, Joseph, but don't utter a word; not a single word."

He listened then, and he heard the signal softly whistled.

"Now, remember, don't say a word; not one; but listen carefully to everything I say. Don't answer by yes or no, even, but attend to what I say and then do exactly as I shall tell you. If at any moment you fail to understand, cough, and I will repeat what I have said. If, when I am through, anybody in the house should ask you who was at the phone, make any excuse you please. I'll sing a snatch of a song and you can say you were listening to singing on the wire.

"Joseph, I want you to leave the house and come to the Clarendon Hotel to meet me. I will wait here for you. That is where I am now. Don't leave within half an hour, because I don't want your going out to be associated with this telephone.

"If I am asked for by any person, you are to say that you have no idea when I will return.

"If there is a woman there who is making any claims to a right to be there, deny those rights, or, at least, any knowledge of them, until you have seen me. Ask her to leave the house, and if she refuses to do so, ignore her. Act just as if she does not exist. Don't see her. Don't hear a word that she says. Look through her, past her, beyond her, never at her.

"If she speaks to you, don't answer; don't hear her. If she gets in your way, walk around her.

"If she presents herself at table, don't wait upon her. Don't prevent her from waiting upon herself, don't do anything to interfere with her; just ignore her entirely.

"Lock the door of my sleeping-room and of Chick's and Patsy's. If she persists in remaining there overnight—but I will see you in time to arrange for that, only lock those doors as I have told you to do before you come out. If there is anything you do not understand whistle softly."

He waited a moment, and, hearing no whistle, continued:

"Now, remember, wait half an hour and then come to the Clarendon. I will be waiting for you. You need not say anything to Mrs. Peters until you return after seeing me. Let her treat the woman as she sees fit. If you have understood everything, cough slightly."

A low cough came to him over the phone.

"That is all right. Now come to me in half an hour and be prepared to tell me all that has happened there this evening. Good-by."

CHAPTER VII.

NICK CARTER'S COUNTERPLOT.

It was exactly forty minutes after Nick telephoned when Joseph entered the Clarendon Hotel and the detective at once conducted his servant to a room he had secured for the purposes of the interview.

"Now, Joseph," he said, "there is a woman there, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir."

"And she claims—what?"

"Why, it is all so absurd, sir."

"Never mind all that. Tell me exactly what has happened at the house since seven o'clock this evening. Everything. I wish to know everything."

"Yes, sir."

"Well?"

"It was after seven, I think, sir—eight I should say—when the bell rang and I went to the door. There was a woman standing on the doorstep—a lady she looked to be, sir—and the instant I opened the door she entered the house, brushing me aside as if I were of no account whatever. At the same time she said:

"Has Mr. Carter returned?"

"No, ma'am," I replied to her, following her into the library, for that happened to be the room she selected to enter.

"She turned upon me then and looked me over from head to foot, as if I were a donkey on sale, and she demanded:

"Who are you, pray?"

"I am Joseph," I replied.

"Oh, yes; I have heard about you. Well, Joseph, Mr. Carter and I returned to New York together this evening. I left him at the station. He had other places to go and we parted there. He will be home presently, and, in the meantime, you may get me a sandwich or something. We will have dinner after your master arrives."

"But, madam," I said, "please be good enough to tell me who you are."

"What? Did you not receive Mr. Carter's message?"

"No, madam. I have received no message from Mr. Carter," I told her.

"That is strange," she said. "But he will be here very soon. Be spry, Joseph, and get me a bite to eat. I am about famished."

"Madam," I said, "before I serve you it is necessary that you should tell me who you are. Mr. Carter is away from home, and in his absence I could not serve you without at least being informed as to who you are."

"Well, sir, she looked me all over again, and then very coolly she said:

"I don't think you intend to be impertinent, Joseph; but you are so. I am Mrs. Carter. I am your mistress, just as Mr. Carter is your master. Now make haste and serve me."

"Well, sir, I didn't know what to do. I just put her down as being off her nut, sir; topky, you know, and I thought it best to placate her; besides, if she was hungry I saw no reason why she shouldn't have something to eat, although she was that well dressed you'd have supposed her pockets were bulging with money."

"So you got her something to eat, did you?"

"Yes, sir. I made her a couple of sandwiches and carried them to her with a bottle of ginger ale; but while I was below stairs I told Mrs. Peters all about it."

"What did she say?"

"She quite agreed with me that the woman was crazy, although she doesn't look so in the least. She's a stunning-looking woman, sir; but I suppose you have seen her?"

"Yes; I have seen her, all right. Go on with your story."

"When Mrs. Peters heard what I had to say she said she would take the sandwiches up to her, which she did, and the two of them were still talking together in the library when you telephoned to me."

"They must have been a long time at it."

"They were; they are, in fact, for, when I came away, half an hour after you telephoned, they were still in the library together."

The detective smiled grimly.

He believed that he could tell what was going forward inside the library almost as well as if he were an eye witness to the scene.

He knew what Pauline could do with people, once she made an effort; and now he understood that she was working her magic wiles upon the housekeeper, getting her on the side of the enemy—if that were possible.

But he also knew that Mrs. Peters was much too loyal a woman to be easily influenced.

"So in reality you know of nothing more than you have already told me, do you?" the detective asked.

"No, sir; not a thing."

"Have you heard from Chick or Patsy, since they went away?"

"Not a word, sir."

"Well, until they appear I want you to remain on guard at the front door night and day. Have your meals taken to you there; sleep there, on a rug or a blanket. Don't let that door out of your sight for an instant until you have seen both Chick and Patsy, or have communicated with them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. It shall be as you say."

"I don't want either of them to enter the house while that woman is there—and she will stay there till I find a means of driving her out."

"Yes, sir."

"When either of them appear—they may and probably will arrive together—don't let them enter the house. If it happens in the night, step outside with them on the doorstep and tell them the whole story."

"But I don't know the whole story, sir."

"You will before I get through with you. Tell them to come to this hotel and to take a room in Patsy's name and wait here for a communication from me. Keep them out of the house whatever you do."

"Yes, sir."

"To-night, before I retire, I will write you a letter in which I will tell you that I am going out of town again without going home. In the letter I will make no mention of the woman. After you read the letter you will leave it lying open on the hall table."

"Yes, sir."

"In other respects you are to follow literally the directions I have given you over the telephone."

"Yes, sir."

"You will let Mrs. Peters conduct herself as she pleases toward the unwelcome guest. If she chooses to wait upon her, well and good. But you——"

"I am to ignore her."

"Just as utterly as if she were not there. You are not to see her or hear her; you are not to answer her if she speaks to you. Only don't stand too close to her at such times, Joseph, for she has got a temper like a wildcat."

"Yes, sir. I'm not afraid of it."

"Nevertheless, keep an eye on her."

"I will. Suppose she should leave the house?"

"I don't think she will do that. If she should, don't

answer the bell when she returns. Keep a watch so you will know if it is she or not who rings."

"And Mrs. Peters?"

"Let Mrs. Peters do as she pleases. You have not had time to communicate with her since I telephoned to you, therefore say nothing whatever to her about having heard from me or seen me."

"Very well, sir."

"If the woman should go out, and Mrs. Peters chooses to admit her when she returns, let her do so. Conduct yourself on the same plan that I have already outlined to you."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, Joseph, I will tell you the story, for you should know it all."

"Thank you, sir."

"I want you to remember it carefully, and also all this conversation, for it is not unlikely that you may some day be called upon to repeat the whole thing in a court-room."

"Yes, sir."

And Nick did tell Joseph the entire story from beginning to end, omitting nothing. The old man was already more or less conversant with the other two cases in which Pauline was involved, for he had heard the detective and his assistants discuss them; but Nick wanted him to get it all quite straight in his mind so he went over the entire ground.

"I am convinced, Joseph," he said, in conclusion, "that Pauline has been planning this affair for a long time. I know her well enough to realize that she would not have undertaken it unless she was prepared to go into open court and substantiate her claims. That she has documentary evidence to offer there can be no doubt, and, taken on the face of it, it is doubtless sufficient to convince any ordinary man."

"Yes, sir. She's a bad woman, sir."

"And a clever one. Don't forget that."

"No, sir."

"Well, her position at the house at the present moment is just this: She has gone there in my absence, claiming to be my wife. You do not believe her; you merely thought her crazy."

"That's the truth, sir."

"So she remains there without being recognized for what she claims. There is no one there with authority to put her out of the house. You don't think it best to call an officer, because I might not like it, and might return at any moment. Therefore she is, under the circumstances, no better established there than any

woman would be who might have forced an entrance in the same manner."

"I see, sir. And that is why you don't wish the young masters to enter the house."

"Precisely."

"And you, sir? May I ask, respectfully, of course, what you are going to do?"

"Poor old Joe! You're worried, aren't you? Well, you need not be."

"I am worried a little, sir. She seems to have played her cards mighty well."

"She has, indeed. Well, I shall go on her back track. I may be gone a week, or two weeks, or even three or more; but when I return I shall be prepared to arrest that woman as a forger of documents—if she should dare to show them. And I shall have trailed down the parties who have assisted her in her preparations to commit this outrage."

"Good, sir! Splendid!"

"You see, Joseph, I must anticipate every move she will make. I must be prepared, when she exhibits a marriage-certificate, to prove that it's a forgery. I must be prepared, when her witnesses are brought forward, if they ever are, to arrest them for perjury, and to prove the perjury. I must get behind her machinations and prove their falsity before she has an opportunity to offer her documentary evidence."

"But what about those witnesses she picked up, so naturally, on the railroad, sir?"

"Their evidence will fall flat when the other is proved false. But if I can get what I go after, Pauline will never try to carry her case into court—— But I will."

"What! You, sir?"

"Yes. I'll send her to prison again, for this business."

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER PLAYS A DOUBLE PART.

The detective had dismissed Joseph, and the servant had gotten as far as the door on his way out when Nick called him back.

"Wait, Joseph," he said. "I have got another idea. It is strange that it did not occur to me before. Sit over there while I think it out."

He looked at his watch and then began pacing up and down the room. The time was then shortly before ten o'clock; as New York City reckons time it was yet early in the evening.

"Stay where you are, Joseph, till I return," he said presently, and, seizing his hat, he went out.

Everybody knows that along Fourth Avenue just below Fourteenth Street there are many theatrical supply stores where all sorts of make-up may be purchased. Nick's hope was that he would be able to find one such place that had not yet closed for the night.

He was not disappointed. He found the sort of place he wanted and he purchased the articles he needed, presently returning with them to the room where he had left Joseph.

"I have decided on a somewhat different course of action," he told his servant as soon as he was in the room. "The instructions I have already given you will hold good when you return to the house, but I have decided that to-night I will go there in your place; I will go there as Joseph, and you will remain here in this room till my return, which will be some time during the forenoon to-morrow. You can order your meals sent to you here; you can send for the papers in the morning, and you can find a way to kill time till I return."

"Yes, sir. Certainly, sir. You are going to make yourself up to represent me?"

"Yes, Joseph. That is precisely what I am going to do; and since it was to be your policy not to speak to the woman or to appear to hear anything she said to you, I will have no difficulty in deceiving her, clever as she is." And he set to work making the change.

It was by no means the first time that Nick Carter had made himself up as Joseph. Readers of Nick Carter histories will recall many such occasions. In fact, it had always been Nick Carter's policy to have people about him, who were sufficiently like him in physique, to render such a change comparatively easy—to him.

He had purchased all the necessary articles for the make-up, and now he lost no time in adjusting them, after which a transfer of their outer clothing was all that remained to be done.

Within an hour from the time the idea had occurred to him Nick Carter was transformed into a perfect counterpart of Joseph and was ready to leave the hotel.

"I shall return here to carry out the plans I have formulated, some time to-morrow," he said, as he was taking his leave. "I cannot say at just what time I will be here, but it will be as early in the day as possible. You are to wait patiently till I come."

"Yes, sir."

"You may retire whenever you get ready, and sleep

the sleep of the just with no thought of being disturbed this night."

"Yes, sir."

Twenty minutes later Nick Carter admitted himself to his own house, but in the character of Joseph, and with every outward appearance of being he.

As he entered the front hall he noticed that a light was still burning in the library, that the door was partly ajar, and that voices proceeded from that room; the voices of Pauline and Mrs. Peters, the housekeeper, as he quickly discovered.

"They seem to have found plenty of food for discussion," he thought to himself, as he closed the outer door behind him.

But the slight noise made by his entrance had been heard, and in an instant more Pauline appeared in the doorway of the library. There was an eager, triumphant look in her eyes, as if she had confidently expected to see Nick Carter in the hall, and it was quite plainly to be seen that she was greatly disappointed when she saw only Joseph—as she supposed.

"Oh! It is you, is it?" she exclaimed.

Nick made no response whatever, following out the plan he had made for Joseph, but he calmly seated himself in a chair near the door as Joseph would have done under the circumstances.

Pauline came nearer to him, her eyes flashing angrily, her expression ominous.

"Why don't you answer me?" she demanded.

The supposed Joseph made no reply, but gave his whole attention to dusting the lapel of his coat with his fingers. Pauline approached more closely.

"Let me tell you something," she said, with cold anger. "I am Mrs. Carter, and the mistress of this house. If you persist in your present conduct toward me you shall be sent away, bag and baggage, the first thing in the morning. Don't think for a moment that you can stay here and defy me, because you cannot. Now, answer me! Where have you been?"

No answer. Nick continued to dust the lapel of Joseph's coat; but inwardly he was thankful that he had returned there in Joseph's place, for the latter would not have known what to do in the face of this new development.

"You are discharged!" exclaimed Pauline. "I do not know what is due you in the form of pay, but you may come after it when Mr. Carter returns. Now, you must leave the house at once—instantly."

Nick did not budge or appear to hear what Pauline had said; and at that moment Mrs. Peters appeared in the library doorway.

"Madam!" she exclaimed. "May I speak to you a moment?"

"Well?" demanded Pauline, turning toward her.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. Mr. Carter will not like it, I know. Joseph has served his master long and faithfully, and Mr. Carter will be very angry if you send him away. Come back into the library for a moment. Please come."

For an instant Pauline hesitated, but then she followed Mrs. Peters into the library and closed the door.

Nick made no effort to hear what was said between them, for he knew it would be impossible; the rooms of his house, and the doors opening upon them, were made sound proof.

But he could imagine what was going on, and he wondered if Pauline would have the hardihood to carry out her threat. He wondered also what Joseph would have done under the circumstances.

There could be no more faithful servant in all the world than Joseph. Given a specific direction, he could be relied upon to carry it out to the letter; but, bring him face to face with a new condition where he had to take the initiative, and he was inevitably at a loss. The detective was more than glad that he had returned to the house in Joseph's place.

He seized upon the opportunity to run up the stairs to discover if Joseph had carried out his instructions about locking the rooms—that is, his own and Patsy's and Chick's; and he found that they were tightly closed so that even Mrs. Peters could not gain admittance to them without calling upon Joseph to supply the extra keys.

Satisfied as to that, he returned to the ground floor and had just taken his seat again upon Joseph's chair when the library door opened and the two women came out.

This time Pauline did not so much as glance in Nick's direction, but swept past him and up the stairs toward the second floor as if she were indeed the proprietor of everything in sight. Mrs. Peters, however, stopped beside the supposed Joseph.

Now, Mrs. Peters is one of those women who are exceedingly shrewd about some things and unspeakably dull about others. She is good to the core, and, notwithstanding her long experience with Nick Carter as his housekeeper, she still believes that others are as well-intentioned as herself. Particularly is this true about other women.

Nick could see that she had swallowed Pauline's story whole; that she believed it. That was where her dullness came in. He also knew that if he spoke a

word to her, Mrs. Peters would know instantly that it was not Joseph who was talking: That was where her natural shrewdness came in.

For just a moment he considered taking her into his confidence, but then he thought better of it; if he carried out the plans he had formulated, it was not wise to let any person know that he was personally in the house while that woman was there. So, when Mrs. Peters spoke to him, he kept silent.

"Joseph," she said, in her kindly tone, "why do you refuse to speak to madam? Why do you choose to ignore her?"

No reply.

"Believe me, Joseph, you are making a mistake. You are, indeed."

No reply.

"At least you can speak to me. There is no reason why you should not do that."

No reply.

"I have seen madam's certificate of marriage. She has shown me her wedding-ring, engraved with Mr. Carter's initials and her own, and the date of the wedding. She has several letters that he has written to her. I am satisfied that she is, indeed, Mrs. Carter—only it does seem strange that he should have kept us in ignorance of the change. She is our mistress now, and as such we must obey her."

No reply.

"She will send you away in the morning if you persist in this conduct," said Mrs. Peters angrily. "There is no sense in your refusing to speak to me. I suppose you resent it because I have accepted her story, but I tell you I have seen the proofs, and I know from all that I have seen that Mr. Carter will be very angry when he discovers how you have acted."

No reply; and, what more Mrs. Peters might have said, was interrupted by Pauline's voice calling down the stairs:

"Why are several of these rooms locked, Mrs. Peters?"

"My dear madam," replied the house keeper hastily, "none of the doors are locked; at least, they were not locked when I was last up-stairs."

"Well, three of them—four, in fact—are locked now." (The fourth was the detective's study which was always kept tightly locked and to which there were only four keys, held by the detective, his two assistants, and Joseph respectively.)

"Joseph, have you locked those doors?" demanded Mrs. Peters sternly, turning again to Nick.

No reply.

"I declare, you are enough to try the patience of a much better tempered woman than I am, Joseph."

"I want those doors, all of them, opened at once! At once, do you hear!" came the voice of Pauline again.

"Joseph, give me the keys of those rooms!" Mrs. Peters demanded; but the supposed Joseph made no move to obey her; he did not act as if he heard the demand.

The housekeeper hesitated a moment and then ascended the stairs, and Nick could hear her explaining to Pauline that Joseph had taken it upon himself to lock the doors and retain the keys, and that nothing, whatever could be done about it until the return of the master.

And then, just as the voices of the two women receded into the guest-chamber which was the only room on the second floor not locked against them, he heard the sound of some one hastily ascending the front steps outside, and he recognized the footsteps of Patsy.

Nick Carter's face lighted with pleasure as he quietly and quickly opened the door and passed outside to meet his second assistant, confronting him just as Patsy was about to put his latchkey into the lock.

"Hello, Joe!" he said. "I have just——"

"Patsy," Nick interrupted him, speaking in his natural tones, "go to the Clarendon Hotel, take a room, and remain there till I come. If you can find Chick, direct him to do the same. On no account must either of you come here."

CHAPTER IX.

PAULINE PLAYS A DARING GAME.

"Chick will be here in ten minutes," said Patsy wonderingly. "What——"

"Can you head him off? Do you know where he is? Can you stop him before he gets here?"

"Yes."

"Do so. Go to the Clarendon, both of you. I will follow you there inside of an hour."

He left Patsy then without another word and returned inside the house—just in time to come face to face with Pauline, who was descending the stairs.

She paused on the bottom step, facing him, her eyes aflame with anger.

"Who were you speaking to outside the door?" she demanded.

Nick made no reply, and with a quick motion Pauline drew a revolver from some place of concealment and pointed it at him.

"Answer me," she said coldly. "or I will——"

She got no further than that, for Nick Carter acted quickly. He darted forward, seized the hand that held the weapon, and wrenched it from her grasp, after which he calmly dropped it into his own pocket and resumed his chair near the door.

For a moment Pauline stood there panting. Her anger was so intense, and she was for the moment so helpless, that the fierceness of her passion paralyzed her; then, to Nick's amazement, she controlled herself and, turning calmly about, ascended the stairs again, and after a moment Nick heard the door of the guest-chamber closed with a bang, and the key turned in the lock, showing that she had fastened herself inside the room.

Utter silence followed upon that.

The detective listened for a long time, but he could hear no sound whatever. He did not know whether Mrs. Peters had retired to her own room or if she was inside the guest-chamber with Pauline—and he did not much care.

It was one o'clock at night when he finally decided to leave the house and return to the hotel where he had left Joseph and where he now knew he would find his two assistants awaiting him; and he let himself out so quietly that he was sure nobody had heard him go.

His first duty on arriving at the hotel, after greeting his two assistants, was to rouse Joseph and tell him to get back into his own clothes; and while Joseph was busily occupied in doing that, he recounted to the servant all that had occurred.

"I want you to return to the house at once," he said. "You need not maintain silence toward Mrs. Peters. Now go, but remember all the things I have said to you, and be very watchful and careful." When Joseph had gone he summoned Patsy and Chick to him, and as concisely as possible told them the entire circumstance of the railroad wreck.

"Now," he said, in conclusion, "we must leave Pauline in possession for the present. There is no other way. She will regard possession as nine points of the law, and it will not occur to her that because I do not appear at the house and am apparently unconscious of her presence there, her position is no better than any other interloper who might have forced an entrance as she did. She will not, I think, attempt to make a move against me until she has seen me and made her demands upon me personally, and, therefore, by keeping away I virtually tie her hands. That is what I wish to do."

"And, in the meantime?" asked Chick.

"In the meantime, Chick, you and I must start for Texas. Patsy must remain here, on guard."

"Texas is a big place, Nick."

"Yes; but for us it is a very small place. Don't you see that in carrying out this plot of hers, Pauline has had to confine herself to one of the places where she and I were present at the same time? That would be a part of her proof. Now, there is only one such place in all Texas where there was time for a marriage to have taken place between Pauline and me, and that is Waco."

Chick and Patsy both nodded their acquiescence to this; and Nick continued:

"She would have had the supposed marriage recounted in the papers. We have only to search the files to find the day and date, the name of the minister who was supposed to perform the ceremony, and from that point I think the rest of it will be easy sailing."

"What am I to do while you are gone?" asked Patsy.

"Observe; nothing more. Keep as close tabs on the house and on everything that goes on there as possible."

"Your game is to be prepared to prove everything false that she offers, before she has an opportunity to offer them?"

"Yes."

"It will take you at least a week, or more than that."

"Probably more. Possibly two or even three weeks; but I shall not return to New York until I know the whole plot, just how it originated, and who is guilty of complicity in it."

"What about Basil King, the life-convict, chief?"

"Well, what about him? What have you in mind, Patsy?"

"This: He was more than a week out of prison at the time she helped him to escape, just before we followed them down to the Rio Grande and arrested them as they were crossing.* I have an idea that he might be mixed up in this somehow."

Nick Carter started to his feet.

"Patsy," he said, "I think you have hit upon the right idea. Although there is a distant half-blood relationship between Pauline and King, he has always been in love with her, and he possessed a sort of weird fascination for her which she could never overcome, although I believe at heart she hates him. You may be sure that Pauline is somehow very positive of the

*See preceding number, NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

ground she stands on, else she would not have dared to do all that she has done. But I will find it all out when I get to Texas."

It was a half-hour later, and they were about to separate when there came a tap at the door, and, opening it, Nick discovered the flushed and angry face of Joseph before him.

"What is the matter now, Joseph?" he asked, admitting the man to the room and closing the door.

"Locked out," replied Joseph laconically.

"Eh? What's that? Locked out?"

"Just that, Mr. Carter."

"Tell me about it."

"When I returned, to the house after leaving you here, my key would not open the door. I tried again and again, thinking that possibly something was suddenly the matter with the lock. But it wouldn't work at all, and at last I had to admit that the door had been fastened against me. Then I rang the bell."

"Well, with what result?"

"A window on the second floor was raised and that woman called out to me. I thought it best to reply to her, then."

The detective smiled. "Go on," he said.

"Who's there?" she demanded.

"It's Joseph," I replied.

"Oh, so you have found your voice, have you? Well, you may go away, Joseph, and you need not return. You'll not be admitted if you do."

"I'll get a policeman," I told her.

"By all means do so," she replied; and, sir, she closed the window down with a bang, and, although I waited out there on the steps a long time and rang and rang, I could not get a peep out of her again; nor did Mrs. Peters pay any attention to me."

Nick Carter shrugged his shoulders; Chick smiled; Patsy grinned. He was the first to venture a remark.

"It's better than a play," he murmured; then he laughed outright, in which the others joined him.

"Pauline has taken possession of the castle," said the detective, at last. "She will keep Mrs. Peters there as long as Mrs. Peters obeys her orders and doesn't interfere with anything she wants to do. When Mrs. Peters does that, she will be fired, too."

"But the whole thing seems preposterous, Nick," exclaimed Chick. "The idea that a person can enter your house in that manner and take possession of it, while you remain near at hand and do nothing—"

"Chick, of course I could go up there and put her out of the house. There is no doubt about that. But don't forget that she has a marriage-certificate with my name upon it; that she has a wedding-ring with my initials and hers, and a date engraved upon it; that she has forged letters and doubtless many other things to substantiate her claims. Of course, they could be disproved—but think of all the unpleasant notoriety

meanwhile. Think of what I would be up against. And how many scandal-loving people in New York do you suppose would believe my story against hers until hers is actually disproved? Not one out of a thousand."

"Perhaps you are right."

"And then there is my profession to be considered. No, Chick, I must leave her in possession until I am prepared to quiet her thoroughly, and without leaving her a last chance."

"And, in the meantime, she'll wreck the house," said Patsy bitterly.

"Very probably. That is, she will force her way into all the rooms and examine everything in them that she can find. But she can't get inside either of the safes, or into the big vault."

"She can get into your cabinet in the study. She can mess your papers terribly."

"Well, we must take a chance on that. It is the only way."

"What shall I do now, sir?" asked Joseph; and Patsy replied before Nick could do so.

"I'll tell you what to do, Joseph, if the chief will excuse me for interrupting."

"Go ahead, Patsy," said Nick.

"You go over to Jersey and visit your sister, and stay there until you are ordered back here by telephone," said Patsy. "I'll play Joseph myself. I can do it quite as well as the chief; and, chief, I'll go up there and camp on the doorsteps till you return from Texas."

"You can do better than that, Patsy," said the detective.

"Well?"

"You can enter the house, and you had better do it. You can open the door even if it is locked against you; and there is the entrance from the other house. I think you had better go inside. By stealth, of course, while Pauline is sleeping."

Patsy started to his feet.

"I know what I will do," he exclaimed. "Don't ask me, chief. Let me work it out in my own way; but while you are in Texas and until you have returned, I will not be idle. I'll checkmate that woman here, while you are making up your case against her in Texas. I'll fool her, that's what I'll do. Get outside of those clothes of yours, Joseph, while I am making up with the same stuff the chief used to-night. I must hurry. I want to get inside the house before Pauline wakes. She will have gone to sleep by now."

"Look out for bullets, Patsy," said the detective, with a smile, as Patsy began work. "She will not hesitate to use them."

"I'm not afraid of her bullets."

"And beware of poison, my lad. That is her best weapon, and she knows how to use it."

"I'd have to swallow something to be poisoned."

"Not necessarily. Don't forget that she is half-Mexican; don't forget that Pauline is a remarkably resourceful woman."

"I won't forget!"

"Use your own discretion in everything that arises. Patsy. Keep a room here, and if I want to communicate with you I'll wire you at this hotel."

CHAPTER X.

NAILING A LIE AND A FRAUD.

"Married.—At the parsonage, by the Reverend Jebediah Hammil, Saturday, June 14, Pauline Hastings of this city, to Nicholas Carter of New York. New York City and Dallas papers please copy."

Nick Carter read the announcement aloud to his first assistant, for they had been searching the files of the paper together.

"There it is," he said. "What did I tell you? Now let us find where the Reverend Jebediah lives and interview him."

And they were not a long time in accomplishing that task. They found that Mr. Hammil, although no longer in direct charge of a flock, was, nevertheless, a much respected citizen, and that he still resided in the house which had once been the parsonage, although a new church and a new home had been built for his successor.

"There is nothing crooked about his part of it, at least," said Nick, as they passed in at the gate and approached the steps of the house where a benign-looking old gentleman was waiting with a smile on his handsome face, to receive them; for he had seen their approach.

"Are you the Reverend Jebediah Hammil, sir?" asked the detective.

"I am—yes, sir. What can I do for you?" was the reply.

"Will you first tell me if you have ever seen me before?" asked Nick.

The old man studied the detective's face closely, and at last shook his head, although a puzzled expression came upon his features.

"I don't think so," he replied. "My vision is not as clear as it was once, and there is a something about you which impresses me as familiar; still, I think I may be positive in the assertion that I have no recollection of having met you before."

"May I ask, sir, if you have a personal acquaintance with Miss Pauline Hastings?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. I know her quite well. But she is no longer Miss Hastings. She was married last June. I married her, in fact, to a gentleman named—let me think—ah, I have it—to a gentleman by the name of Carter; Nicholas Carter was the full name."

"Thank you. Do you remember Mr. Carter's appearance quite well? So that you would know him again if you should see him? If he were standing before you, for instance, as I am now?"

"Oh, I haven't a doubt of it."

"Then I would like to ask you another question. Do

I at all resemble the man to whom you married Miss Hastings?"

"Well, sir, now that you speak of it, there is a resemblance; quite a strong one, in fact, although I should say that he was rather a larger and a somewhat heavier man. His hair was cropped close at the time, I remember, and his complexion was very pale. His eyes were not like yours, either—and your voices are entirely different. That is my one strong point. I never forget voices. What my eyesight refuses to do for me, my ears perform."

"You would remember his voice should you hear it again?"

"Assuredly. Yes, sir," said the old man positively.

"Now, will you be good enough to tell me who were the witnesses to that ceremony, and if they can be found in the city?"

"My wife and my daughter were witnesses; they are here in the house now."

"Will you ask them to come here, please?"

"First, my dear sir, I think you should inform me why you ask all these strange questions. They impress me as somewhat remarkable in their character."

"They are, Mr. Hammil; I will admit that. But I will consider it a favor if you will let my explanation rest until I have seen your wife and daughter. After that I will explain fully and to your entire satisfaction. I am trying to straighten out a tangle; that is all. Will you please summon Mrs. Hammil and your daughter?"

The old man stepped to the door and called aloud:

"Sarah! Rose! Please come here a moment;" and the two women presently appeared. "I do not know how to introduce you, sir, for you have not yet told me your name," said the old man.

"I will introduce myself and my friend in a moment, sir, with your permission. Ladies, if you will pardon me I would like to ask a straightforward question or two. Much, very much, indeed, depends upon your replies. The first one is this: Do you both recall acting as witnesses at the marriage of Miss Pauline Hastings to a man who called himself Nicholas Carter?"

They both replied at once in the affirmative.

"Would either of you be willing to state positively that I was present at that ceremony? Do either of you think that you saw me there?"

"Certainly not," replied the younger of the two women, with some heat, while the old lady shook her head negatively. "There were only two men present; my father, and the groom. Why should you ask us to do such a thing as that?"

"Because I am Nicholas Carter. Pardon me, not the man who married Pauline Hastings, but another. Mr. Hammil, the man who passed by my name at that ceremony was and is now a life-convict in one of the Texas prisons. He had temporarily escaped. It was while he was at liberty—that you performed the wedding ceremony. His right name is Basil King; of that I am convinced. You referred to his pale complexion; that was the prison pallor."

"What you say, sir, is awful! Awful!"

"It is, nevertheless, true. He chose to pass under my name at that marriage, and with the consent of the woman who was with him. She was later charged with murder, if you will recall the circumstances."

"Yes; but—"

"One moment, please. It was the beginning of a deep-laid plot against me. I am Nicholas Carter, a New York detective. I was down here at that time; I was the one who arrested King and who later on made the charges against Miss Hastings—of which, believe me, she is guilty by her own confession to me, notwithstanding the fact that the indictments against her were quashed. Now, she has appeared in New York, claiming me as her husband. She is at this moment in possession of my home, and, unless she is confronted with positive evidence that her supposed proofs will fail, she is in a position to make things very unpleasant for me."

"But it is incredible, sir; incredible."

"Nevertheless, it is true, as I said before. Will you and your wife and daughter take a trip with me to New York? It will be a change for you. It will be an enjoyable trip for you, I think. I will pay all the expenses both ways and while you are there, and I will make you a substantial donation to help you in your charities."

"My dear sir, it is so sudden, so unexpected that—"

But Nick saw by the expression on the women's faces that he had won. A trip to New York possessed its allurements, and he interrupted the old gentleman.

"We will stop at the prison on the way," he said. "We will have King brought before us, so you may identify him. You shall have a week or two weeks if you like in New York, so your wife and daughter can see the city."

"And when would you wish us to start?" asked the daughter, who was herself of middle age.

"To-night," replied Nick, smiling. "You will realize that it is a matter of grave importance to me, Miss Hammil. Your father and mother are both hale and hearty. I don't think they will greatly mind the fatigue of the trip."

That settled it. The allurements were great, and the minister and his family consented.

"There is a train out of the city at ten this evening," said the detective presently, "which will get us to the prison shortly after daylight in the morning. In the meantime, I will talk with the warden over the long-distance telephone, and acquaint him of our coming. There will be no appreciable delay there."

"And when we arrive in New York, what will be our duties there?" asked the old minister.

"I merely wish to bring you all face to face with Pauline. I wish her to realize that her plot has failed. When once she is convinced of that, there will be nothing more to do—for you."

As they left the parsonage the detective said to Chick:

"While I am telephoning to the warden of the prison, I wish you to make a canvas of the leading jewelry-stores in the city and find if you can where that wedding-ring was purchased and engraved."

"I don't think that will be difficult," replied Chick.

"Nor I. Find out who ordered the ring; who had it engraved, and all the particulars about it, and then get an affidavit from the man who sold it. I don't think it will be necessary, but it will be as well to have it."

It was two hours later when the two detectives were together again, and Nick in the meantime had communicated with the warden of the prison and made all the necessary arrangements for an early call there the following morning.

Chick had been likewise successful in his mission.

"I found the jeweler," he told Nick. "It seems that Pauline purchased the ring herself, and ordered the inscription inside of it."

"You secured an affidavit to that effect?"

"Yes."

"When was the ring purchased?"

"That is the best part of it. It was bought only three weeks ago."

"Good! With all Pauline's precautions she had committed some glaring errors in the preparation of her plot, nevertheless. Now, I have one more thing to do, and then we will be prepared to take the train as soon as the time comes."

"What have you got to do now?"

"I shall telegraph to Jimmy Congdon, in Kansas City, to meet us in New York. Can you guess why?"

"I confess that I don't see exactly what good he can do us. He is not in this case, although he was very much in the others."

"That is precisely the point."

"Just what do you mean?"

"Have you forgotten that Irma Congdon, his wife, was murdered in New York City, before the steamship left the dock?"

"No."

"Chick, that particular crime, which Pauline also confessed to me, comes under the jurisdiction of New York State. Down here Pauline was charged only with the killing of John Y. Ransom. If the authorities down here chose to quash the indictments against her, for want of proof, or because convinced of the woman's innocence, she will find that the authorities of New York will be less lenient. I think that Pauline Hastings, or King, has had rope enough, and that it is time she was brought up with a round turn. We will see what New York justice will do to her."

"So, that is your double play, is it?"

"Yes. My first move when we arrive in New York will be to swear out a warrant against her on information and belief, accompany it with my own affidavit as to her confession to me, and then to arrest her for the murder of Irma Ransom Congdon. I still have her glove, which was found in the stateroom where Irma was killed; and this afternoon while you have

been busy I wired to Simms, the man who was with Patsy and me when we captured her and King, down by the Rio Grande. 'If I don't make up a case against her—well, then I don't know my own profession; that's all.'

"I am afraid, Nick, that you are inclined just a little bit to be vindictive, in the present case," said Chick, smiling.

"Well, who would not be so, under the circumstances?"

CHAPTER XI.

NICK CARTER MEETS WITH SURPRISES.

"So, Carter, it is you again, is it? I wonder what you can possibly want with me this time. Not the old story, is it?"

It was the life-convict King who spoke. He had just been ushered into the room where the detective was waiting to receive him. Mr. Hammil, with his wife and daughter, were waiting in the adjoining room until the detective should summon them.

"Yes," replied Nick. "It is I. I am going to give you a little treat, King. I am going to present you to some old acquaintances. But I want you to put those on, first."

He pointed toward a chair whereon was lying a complete suit of citizen's attire, linen and all.

King glanced toward them and shrugged his shoulders.

"What is all that preparation for?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Because I prefer that your acquaintances should not see you in your prison garb. Please make haste. I will turn my back while you dress."

"Really, Carter, you are overmodest—and if you turn your back, I might hurt you. It would be a good opportunity."

"Put on the clothes, King. We need not argue the point."

"Really? Dear me! But I don't think I will put them on, all the same. I prefer these I have on now. I've got used to them, you know."

"King," Nick spoke sternly, "I expected some such refusal from you, and I am prepared for it. I have the authority of the warden for telling you that if you persist in your refusal or cause me unnecessary delay, you will get fourteen days in a dark cell on bread and water, and all your liberties will be denied you for three months. Now, what have you to say to that?"

King's eyes glared ominously. The threat was a serious one. A whipping at the post could be undergone much more easily than the dark cell and the privation of liberties.

Yet for another moment he hesitated, while Nick never once took his eyes off the man; and then, possibly realizing that it was only obstinacy that made him refuse at all, King growled out a curse and began to make the change.

When it was completed, when the convict was fully garbed in citizen's clothes, there remained nothing but the prison pallor of his face and the closely cropped hair to denote what he really was.

Nevertheless, Nick looked him over carefully; then he nodded his head and stepped to the door beyond which Mr. Hammil and the others were waiting. The warden was there also, for Nick desired an extra witness to this scene.

"This way, King," he said. "We will enter the adjoining room if you please."

With a fierce scowl on his face King followed the detective to the door where the latter stepped backward, thus forcing the convict to precede him; and so he entered the room where Jebediah Hammil with his wife and daughter, and Chick and the warden of the prison, were waiting.

The room was in a glare of light, and for a moment King stood in the doorway, blinking; but he heard an exclamation from in front of him which told him instantly why he had been forced to make the change of clothing.

"That is the man!" exclaimed the minister. "That is the man I married to Pauline Hastings. I would recognize him among a thousand."

"And you, Mrs. Hammil? And you, Miss Hammil?" asked the detective.

"Yes," they both agreed. "That is the man who married Miss Hastings in our presence; the man who said his name was Nicholas Carter, and who signed that name on the register."

King burst into laughter.

"That's the game, is it?" he cried out. "I say, Carter, you need not have taken all this trouble. I'd cheerfully have told you all about it. Pauline hasn't treated me any too well since I have been back here."

"How was it that you came to make use of my name at that marriage, King?" asked the detective.

"Well, I couldn't very well use my own. Pauline and I talked it over. Brown, or Jones, or Duffield—it didn't much matter what name was used; only she just flatly refused to go to Mexico with me unless we were married."

"Well, go on. You haven't told me yet what I want to know."

"Well, we agreed upon 'John Brown,' until we were passing through the gate at the parsonage. But right there she stopped me. 'I've got an idea,' she told me, and when I asked her what it was, she said:

"'Why not use the name of Nick Carter?'"

"'Good!' I agreed, and laughed. We went inside then, and the ceremony was performed. I was on the point of telling you about it two or three times after you arrested me down at the river, but for some reason I didn't. Say, Carter, on the level, has Pauline claimed you as her husband? It would be just like her to do that."

"Yes."

The convict gave his thigh a resounding slap.

"By jingo!" he cried out. "That was her game all

along. I see it now. She knew that I would be taken again, or, anyhow, she meant to get rid of me—maybe she meant to do for me the same way she did for John Y. But the point is that she was laying her plans even then, to get hunk with you. Isn't she a honey-cooler, though?"

"Warden," said the detective, turning to that official, "are you willing to make affidavit for me to what you have heard here to-day?"

"Certainly, Mr. Carter."

"I'll make affidavit, too, if you want it," said King. "A life-convict's oath wouldn't be any good, unsupported by other testimony—you know I am a lawyer—but taken in connection with the testimony of the preacher, here, it will be accepted."

"I will take your affidavit if you will make it."

"I'll do that. I'll draw it myself, if the warden will give me the wherewith. I'll draw his, too, if you like. It will be a change from driving pegs into shoes."

And so the convict was put to work drawing the affidavits while the others waited for him to complete them, the warden sending in the meanwhile for a judge of the supreme court, who lived not far away, to take their oaths.

When the papers were drawn and sworn to, when everything was in readiness for Nick and his party to take their leave, King asked the detective if he might speak a moment alone with him.

"Carter," he said, when they had withdrawn to a corner of the room, "notwithstanding all that you have done to me, I like you. You're square. You fight even and aboveboard and on the level, with no quarter given or taken. I like that. It is the way I always fought. Now I want to tell you something to prove it."

"Well, King, what is it?"

"Your life isn't worth a snap of my fingers so long as Pauline is at large. She has sworn to kill you, and she will keep her word if she has half a chance."

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"That's all right; but you speak about it in a careless manner, as if you didn't much care."

"I don't. She won't have the chance."

"Don't be too sure of that. She is much more dangerous than a rattlesnake."

"Well?"

"She has sworn to have your life, or, failing that, to blind you or maim you for the rest of it; and she is prepared to carry out one or another of her threats at the slightest warning of danger to herself."

"How, prepared?"

"For one thing she carries a small silver vial at her belt. It is supposed to be filled with smelling-salts, but it isn't; it's filled with vitriol. That is intended for your eyes, if all else fails."

"I have noticed the vial. What else?"

"You may also have noticed an ornament that dangles from the little gold chain she always wears about her throat."

"Yes."

"Well, that ornament is a hollow bulb. It is filled with prussic acid. That is intended for you if she can find a way to force it between your lips. You know how quickly it would kill?"

"Yes."

"That isn't all. She has still another weapon to use."

"She seems to be well armed."

"She is indeed. You know she is half-Mexican. Her mother's people were originally Oaxacans. They were adepts at vegetable poisons. She carries a small penknife in her wrist-bag, which is tipped with one of those poisons. I saw a man die from the scratch of a knife tipped with that poison, once. It was horrible, and I never want to see such a sight again."

"And do you mean that she has made all those preparations for me?"

"Yes. I can see exactly what she planned to do."

"Well?"

"She thought she would torture you first with the unpleasantness about this marriage business, and when she had had her fill of that kind of pleasure out of you, she intended to finish the job with one or the other of the things I have told you about. I suppose she would have used the one that seemed most practical at the moment."

"Probably."

"I have told you all this because I don't want to see you murdered in cold blood—as you would be if you should walk calmly into her presence and announce that the game is up. You have got to get at her somehow, on the sly. And that bulb on her chain——"

"Well?"

"If she can't use it on you, she'll use it on herself, at the last moment. Now, if you can manage to get behind her—although you'll find that it won't be a bit easy to do that—if you can manage somehow to get behind her and seize her arms before she suspects what you are up to, you can take all those things away from her before she has a chance to use any one of them against you or against herself."

"I'm sure I am indebted to you, King, for what you have told me. Will you tell me exactly why you have done so? It isn't solely because you care whether I live or die."

"Well, to be honest with you, Carter, it's pretty nearly that. You'll have to take it for that, anyhow. I don't expect to remain here the rest of my life, Carter."

"No? Why not?"

"Oh, I have got friends. They will work for me when I tell them to do so. After four or five years more of it I'll get a pardon. You see. And, say, one thing more."

"Well, King, what is it?"

"Once before when you came here to see me you told me that you would send me books to read. I don't want you to laugh at me now, will you, Carter?"

"Certainly not. Is there some particular book that you would like to have?"

"Yes. Just one. With good big print, so I can read it easily, in a poor light."

"Very well, King. What book is it?"

"The Bible, Carter. That's what it is."

Nick was astounded; but he seized King's hand and shook it, saying in a low tone:

"You shall have the best one I can find, King. Good-by, and thank you!"

CHAPTER XII.

A CRITICAL MOMENT.

We need not discuss that trip to New York nor the enjoyment that Nick's three guests got out of it. It was almost pathetic to watch them, and the old gentleman confessed to Nick that none of them had ever been outside the State of Texas before.

When they arrived at the metropolis the detective took them to the Clarendon, as being the place where he would find Patsy, and the young assistant, having been notified of their arrival, was waiting to receive them.

"Now, Patsy," he said, as soon as they were alone together, "tell me everything that has happened since I went away."

"Well, nothing has happened—that is, nothing of any account. Pauline has broken into all the locked rooms in the house, including your study. She is still holding the fort there."

"Have you been inside the house?"

"Sure; every night. But I haven't let her know it."

"Is Mrs. Peters there?"

"No; Pauline fired her the second day."

"And the other servants?"

"Oh, she fired them, too. She has got a new set there."

"And our clients? What has happened to such of them as have been to the house?"

Patsy grinned.

"I have headed them off as best I could. I've spent most of my time, in the character of Joseph, in front of the house. But a few new ones have got past me."

"Do you mean that she admitted them?"

"Sure; and consulted with them, too, as nearly as I can find out. Gee, chief, she takes all the blue-ribbon prizes that were ever made. Talk about nerve! Whew!"

"Has she been outside the house herself?"

"No; but she has told everybody she admitted to the house that she is Mrs. Carter. She sent a notice of the marriage to all the papers, and it was printed in the whole bunch. Oh, she has been busy, all right."

"Well, Patsy, I shall go there myself at four o'clock this afternoon, and—"

"And you'll want Chick and me with you, won't you?"

"Don't interrupt me, Patsy. No, I shall not want you, although I wish you to arrange to arrive there,

both of you exactly twenty minutes after I pass through the door."

"Maybe you won't pass through the door. She has kept poor Joseph—that's me—out, all right, all right."

"I think she will admit me."

"Possibly. That would be part of her game."

The detective looked at his watch.

"It is now half-past three," he announced. "I will start at once. I want you to call Chick and follow me, and while you are on the way up there, or before you start, I want you to call up the garage on the phone and tell Danny to bring the automobile here and get Mr. and Mrs. Hammil and their daughter. Have you got that?"

"Yes."

"I shall enter the house at exactly four o'clock. You are to enter it with Chick at exactly twenty minutes past four. I want Danny to arrive in front of the house at exactly half-past four, but the Hammils must remain in the automobile until they are called."

"All right. I'll attend to it all."

"I shall arrest Pauline to-day for malicious mischief. When I get her lodged in the station-house I will swear out a warrant against her for the murder of Irma Congdon. By the way, have you seen or heard anything of Jimmy?"

"Not a thing."

"He is due to arrive some time to-day, and I didn't tell him not to go to the house. I wonder if Pauline would admit him if he went there?"

"You can search me. It would stir her up a bit to see him, I imagine. She hates him almost as much as she does you."

"I'll go there at once," said Nick, starting to his feet. "Remember my instructions."

When, a little later, he ascended the steps of his own house and inserted his latchkey in the lock, it would not work, so he stepped backward a pace and rang the bell.

After a considerable wait, he heard steps approaching the door from within the house, and a moment later the door opened as far as the chain bolt would permit, and a face he did not know appeared at the opening.

"What do you want?" demanded the owner of the face, which was not prepossessing.

"I am Mr. Carter. Unfasten that door and let me in," he replied sternly.

"How do I know that you're mister——"

Nick, who had gone there prepared for just such a repulse, held a pair of steel nippers concealed in the palm of his right hand, and without waiting for the woman to say more, he used them to bite the chain in half, and then he shoved the door violently open. The woman would have called out in affright, but he seized her before she could do so, and hushed her. Then he put her outside the door, closing it after her.

"Come back in an hour," he told her. "Just now I don't want you here."

For a moment he stood in the lower hall, listening,

conscious of the fact that he had entered without noise, although the ringing of the door-bell might have been heard by others than the maid.

Hearing no sound, he entered the library, but there was no one there. He looked into the drawing-room, but that was also deserted. A strange and ominous silence filled the house.

Presently he ascended the stairs, and as he reached the top of them he discovered that the door of his study was partly open, although no sound proceeded from inside the room.

"Where is Pauline, that she paid no attention to the ringing of the bell?" he asked himself; and then he stole softly forward and peered into the room through the narrow opening.

He barely repressed a cry of amazement at what he saw there, and for a full minute he remained perfectly still, watching.

James Congdon was lying on his back on the floor. His arms were stretched out at right angles from his body. He was breathing heavily, and he was staring up into the burning eyes of Pauline, who was on her knees beside him, bending over him.

There was a wicked smile on her face, a gloating, fiendish smile, and she was holding in her right hand, with the point not an inch from Congdon's throat, the small but murderous penknife that King had described to the detective.

It was a tableau fraught with terrible possibilities. Nick Carter scarcely dared to breathe, lest Pauline should hear him; and he knew if she did so it would mean the instant death of Congdon.

How glad the detective was that he had approached noiselessly; that he had made no sound in ascending the stairs. But perhaps Pauline would not have heard him. She seemed not to have heard the ringing of the door-bell.

It was evident that she was absorbed in her present occupation.

For the first time since he had known her, Nick believed the woman to be mad. The expression of her face as she knelt there, gloating over her victim, suggested it.

Or was it only intense hatred, after all?

The tableau lasted several minutes, and then Pauline spoke, and there was an exultant chuckle in her voice as she did so.

"You don't want to die, do you, Jimmy?" she asked. "Then make the promise I demand. If you do not, I will kill you. I surely will. You know what is on the point of this knife-blade: You know what it does to people who get it in their veins. They burn up inside; at least, that is how it feels. I want to kill you, and I don't want to, Jimmy. I won't, if you make the promise, taking the oath on the soul of your dead wife. You are one of those poor fools who keep promises and oaths. Swear that you will uphold me in my claim against Nick Carter, Jimmy, and you shall live. Refuse—and take this! Don't move. If you do, I will prick your neck with this knife-point."

The detective did not wait to hear any more. He thought he saw in her expression a determination to kill Jimmy anyway; he thought she was only playing with him, and he began cautiously to steal forward.

The soft velvet rug on the floor gave back no sound. There was not, is not, a creaky board in Nick Carter's house. There is not a hinge that gives forth a sound or a creak.

He pushed open the door just enough to permit him to enter; then he tiptoed forward as silently as a shadow.

He made no effort against her until he was actually bending over her; but then his right hand shot forward as quickly as the tongue of a toad; it seized Pauline's wrist and wrenched it aside, hurling the penknife harmlessly away; and with his other hand he seized Pauline's left arm and drew it backward, while all in the same motion he pulled her away from her intended victim, brought her to her feet, and there he pinioned her arms behind her, and held her immovably, despite her struggles.

"Open the bottom drawer of my desk, Jimmy," he commanded coolly. "Bring me that pair of armlets with the eight-inch chain that you will find. That is right. Snap them on her arms just above the elbows. So! Now take that gold chain from Pauline's neck. Good; and now the silver vial at her belt. Don't open it. Now, Jimmy, while I make Pauline comfortable in a chair and fasten her there, run down to the front door and see if my automobile is there. Ah! here are Chick and Patsy. It is all over, my lads. You may bring Mr. and Mrs. Hammil and Miss Hammil directly to this room."

"The Hammils!" exclaimed Pauline. It was the first word she had uttered.

"Yes, Pauline. I have been to Texas. I have brought the Hammils back with me," and he stepped behind her and whipped the wedding-ring from her finger. "You won't need this, Pauline," he said. "Your husband is in prison for life, you know."

It is only necessary to add that Pauline was subsequently indicted for the murder of Irma; that she was tried, and, after one disagreement, was finally convicted of manslaughter and sent to prison for eight years; and she went there swearing that she would yet find a way to make Nick Carter suffer. Whether she will or not remains to be seen.

The Hammils enjoyed their trip to the North hugely, and finally returned to Texas, forever grateful to Nick Carter and the chance that had given them the trip. James Congdon is still practising law in Kansas City.

Nick Carter, of course, sent denial notices of his marriage to the papers, explaining that it was another man, not he, who had married Miss Hastings.

THE END.

The next number (625) will contain "A Millionaire Swindler; or, Nick Carter's Exposure of a Stupendous Scheme."



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In the Den of the "Free Minters."

By T. H. FOWLER.

"I nearly done it to-day, Jack!"

"Done wot?"

"Got a regular situation, in course," rejoined the first speaker, James Croypley—better known among his mates as "Limping Jimmy"—a ragged, half-starved street arab.

After disposing of the last of his evening papers his friend, Jack Horton, had taken over a share of Jimmy's stock of matches, in accordance with a long-standing agreement, and the pair were now—half an hour after midnight—wearily trudging in the direction of the particular archway on the riverside that had long served the waifs as home.

"Oh, yes," continued Jimmy, "I nearly done it. The old codger wot wanted a errand-boy didn't make much fuss about this"—indicating his crippled foot—"though he said as how he would sooner have a nipper wot was sound in wind an' limb like. He seemed willin' ter forgive me for bein' a cripple—but the 'tther thing knocked him!"

"Yer don't mean ter say," gasped Jack, who knew what Jimmy meant by 'the 'tther thing,' "as yer went an' told the covey as yer dad was in quod? Oh, Jimmy, I didn't think yer was so precious green!"

"But I didn't tell 'im," said Jimmy, adding gloomily: "He knowed it—everybody 'pears ter know it. Wot's the good of having a father at all, I'd like ter know?"

"Well," said Jack decidedly, "I ain't got none myself, an' wot's more—if yer never sees him an' only hears tell on him, like you does, when yer wants a job—I don't want none neither!"

Ten or twelve years ago the Chicago police had more than their hands full with the notorious gang of coiners known as the "Free Minters." A raid was eventually made on a house out on the West Side. It was badly timed, and the gang—with the solitary exception of Croypley, Jimmy's father—escaped.

The prisoner was described as the leader of the gang, and was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment. Croypley, however, was merely a tool, and his absence did not inter-

fere with the work of the gang, which, at the time of which we write, was as active as ever.

"Givin' in ain't not a bit er use," Jack remarked, linking his arm in that of his friend, "so keep yer pecker up, Jimmy. Wot's done can't be undid, an'—Hullo! Wot's the row in our avenoo?"

Jack pulled up suddenly at the corner of a short row of warehouses leading down to the river.

A boat was moored at the wharf below, from which a couple of men sprang, half-dragging, half-carrying a third, who struggled in vain to free himself.

Before the boys had recovered from their first surprise, the prisoner had been thrust through a low doorway into the last warehouse of the row, the door closed noiselessly after the party, and the boat had disappeared.

"That's wot I calls a fair knock-out," exclaimed Jack, rubbing his eyes to make sure he was not asleep. "Come on, Jimmy, let's see wot the game is."

Without waiting for his chum's assent, he crept cautiously along the wall side until the doorway was reached. There was a notice, which the boys had often seen, to the effect that the warehouse was to let, but—as Jimmy whispered after listening intently for a moment, "there 'peared ter be some bargin' big rats in the cellar."

"They're a-scrappin' like mad," Jack whispered excitedly, with his ear to the bottom of the door, "though I can't 'actly make out what's the argyment."

Just then his quick eye fell on an iron grating in the foot-path.

"Ketch hold o' the other end," he whispered. "Gently does it! I calls it ongentlymanly on 'em ter keep us in the dark!"

When the grating had been silently raised, the boys discovered that the passage by that means into the cellar had been boarded up. However, by leaning well over the aperture, head downward, Jack discovered a chink between the boards quite large enough for his purpose.

By the flickering light from a candle stuck in a bottle on the floor, Jack counted nine men in the cellar, including the bound and helpless figure in the corner.

One individual, flashily dressed, was seated on an upturned barrel, addressing the company.

"Take the gag away," he said, nodding toward the prisoner, "and stick him on his pins."

When this had been done a tall, closely cropped fellow glared at his captors.

"Welcome to the new and enlarged premises of the Free Mint," said the man on the barrel. "Sorry we had to fetch you!"

"So," said the prisoner fiercely, making a step forward before he remembered that his arms were bound, "this is your work, captain, is it? I might have guessed it. Well, well, what do you want?"

"Merely a renewal of the old understanding. The Free Minters cannot afford to part with such a useful member. You know the rules. We should not have troubled you if you—hem!—holiday had not impaired your memory. You have been free ten days, and have neglected to report yourself at headquarters. How is it? Ten years ago—"

"I was a fool," interrupted the prisoner. "To-day I know enough to steer clear of you and yours. You have me—do your worst."

The individual referred to as the captain threw one leg over the other, rested his elbow on his knee, and leveled a revolver at the head of the prisoner.

"Now, look here, Jimmy," he said persuasively, "I don't want to go too far, but you know too much of our business, and the safety of the band has to be considered. I will give you three minutes in which to decide. If at the end of that time you are still determined to cut your old pals you will take the short cut—through that window—to the bottom of the river, a route already followed by other dangerous members. Now, what is it to be?"

For reply the prisoner bounded forward, and, before any of the others could seize him, planted his foot full in the chest of the leader, who rolled from the barrel like a log.

In a moment all was confusion, cries and curses mingling with the sounds of a desperate struggle.

Suddenly above the general hubbub piped a youthful voice: "Good on yer, guv'nor," it said. "Lay into 'em!"

It was Jack, who had completely lost his head for the moment. Jimmy caught him by the shoulder and dragged him from the opening. In doing so, however, the cripple overbalanced himself and fell with a crash against the old boards.

Those gave way, and, to the horror of his chum, Jimmy tumbled through the opening, alighting on the almost unconscious form of the captain.

At the same moment Jack's presence was discovered. One of the gang made a rush, but too late—the boy had gained the pavement.

Just as the head of his pursuer emerged from the opening Jack flung the heavy grating into position and fled, with the ruffian's shriek of pain ringing in his ears.

He did not slacken his pace until he reached the top of the street. Dashing round the corner, he ran full-tilt into the arms of a policeman coming in the opposite direction.

"Hullo, youngster!" ejaculated the burly constable, seizing Jack by the shoulder and turning the light on his prisoner, "what have you been up to, eh?"

Never was the sight of the familiar uniform so welcome to Jack. In a few hurried words he told his tale, which was completed as he trotted alongside his new ally.

Meantime Jimmy had fared badly.

When the captain recovered from the effects of the kick he had received he would have shot his prisoner on the spot, had not one of the men stepped forward and whispered something in his ear.

"Is that so?" he laughed. "Bring the young cub forward."

Jimmy, who had already been bound, was dragged into the middle of the cellar, and the leader of the gang turned to the elder prisoner.

"It must be some little time since you looked on your own flesh and blood," he said mockingly. "Have a good look at him, Cropley!"

"Jimmy, my son!" gasped the elder prisoner, an ashen hue spreading over his features.

"Just so!" laughed his tormentor. "Open the window there."

"What would you do?"

"Oh, don't be alarmed," cried the captain. "I'm not going to part you. This young cub is going into the river, and you will follow."

So fierce was the struggles of the elder Cropley that he had almost freed one of his hands when the window was thrown open.

The fellow who had carried out the chief's orders started back with a cry of dismay as the head and shoulders of a man in the uniform of the police appeared at the window.

"Surrender, in the name of the law!" cried a voice.

A rush was made for the door, but there was no escape that way, while Jack was dancing about among the police in the street, vowing that he would "crack the nut" of the fust cove as shoved his head out or "the grating!"

"You at least shall not boast of to-night's work," roared the captain, springing at Cropley.

He had reckoned without his host. No longer troubled by the others, who were endeavoring to escape, Cropley had freed his hands.

Straight from the shoulder a terrific blow caught the villain between the eyes, and when next the captain recovered his wits he was safely under lock and key, as was every member of the gang.

The living down of a past like that of Cropley, the ex-convict, is no child's play, but with the aid of his new friends,

the police, Jimmy's father soon obtained employment, and has faithfully done his duty.

Jack, yielding to his chum's entreaties, has taken up his quarters with the Cropleys.

Jimmy's father is in the habit of saying that he has two sons now, and wouldn't part with either of them for a gold-mine.

LIGHTNING STRIKES SHIP.

In spite of the popular impression to the contrary, ships remote from the land are seldom damaged by lightning, although some of the most awe-inspiring displays of atmospheric electricity are frequently witnessed by those on board of them.

Standing rigging, and even parts of the running-gear are now made of steel wire, and this substitute for the old-fashioned hemp serves the purpose of lightning-conductor when the ship is not fitted with such an aid to safety. The electric current is conveyed down the wire rigging and reaches the sea through the vessel's metal hull. Damage occurs only if the current be interrupted on its way to earth. In a comparatively large proportion of instances the foreroyal truck is struck by lightning, that of the main less frequently, and the mizen least of the three.

Very serious casualties under this head occurred to warships and merchant vessels in the days of wooden hulls and hempen rigging. * * * In July, 1802, as thirteen sail of the East India Company were trying to round the cape in the vicinity of Algoa Bay, homeward bound, two of them, the *Britannia* and the *Bombay Castle*, were struck by lightning. The foremast of each was soon enveloped in flames, and the masts had to be cut away in order to save the ships and their combustible cargoes. A heavy gale was blowing, the night was dark, and the other ships of the fleet, which were hove to at the time, were witnesses of this thrilling incident.

Many vessels are now fitted with lightning-conductors of approved tests, lest the wire rigging should fail to carry off the electric current. In May, 1896, shortly after a severe thunder-storm, accompanied by lightning and rain in 3 degrees south, 87 degrees east, the *P. and O.* steamship *Victoria* had a sudden increase of deviation, amounting to six degrees in both the standard and the wheel-house compasses, and later it was discovered that the lightning-conductor on the fore had fused. The ship must have been struck by lightning during the storm.

SKI-JUMPING.

Skiing is a popular mode of progression in hilly lands where snow abounds, such as Scandinavia and Siberia; and racing on ski is practised as a sport pretty extensively in northern latitudes. The most important annual competition of this character is that held every February at Holmenkollen, near Christiania; and the "record" leap on ski was one of one hundred thirty-four and one-half feet made by Nils Gjestvang, at Modum, six years ago. Very interesting ski-races take place regularly in the season on the Engardine, and skiing may be practised in winter-time in parts of the north of England and Scotland.

The regulation type of ski is made of narrow planks of well-selected ash, from seven to twelve feet long—according to the height and fancy of their wearer—two and one-half inches to three inches wide, and about one and one-fourth inches thick in the center, tapering to the ends. The ski are bound to the feet with strong straps of leather, and the usual rate of progression for an expert may be put at five and a half miles an hour; but a prodigious speed can be attained where there are steep hills to descend and jump from.



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